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PIANO NO MORI

by ISSHIKI Makoto
一色まこと

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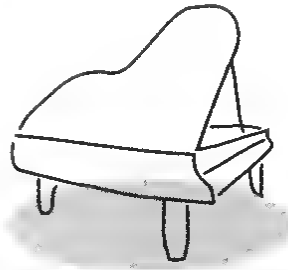
The Perfect World of KAI

26



The Perfect World of KAI

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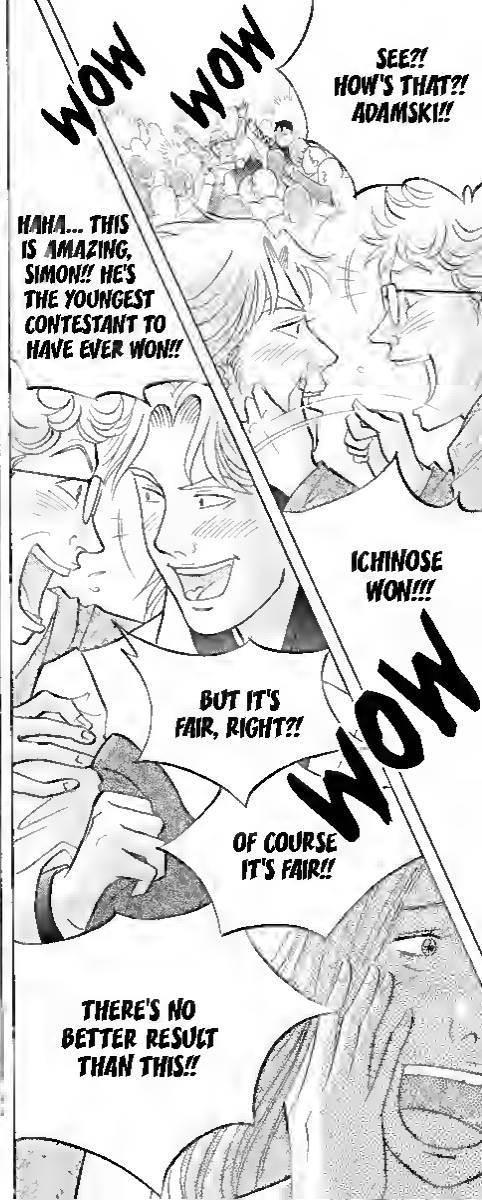
This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people, organizations, and/or events is purely coincidental.

Chapter 233 Sto Lat

!!!!


WOW
WOW
SEE?! HOW'S THAT?! ADAMSKI!!
HAHA... THIS IS AMAZING, SIMON!! HE'S THE YOUNGEST CONTESTANT TO HAVE EVER WON!!
ICHINOSE WON!!!
WOW
BUT IT'S FAIR, RIGHT?!
OF COURSE IT'S FAIR!!
THERE'S NO BETTER RESULT THAN THIS!!

The results could be affected by all sorts of factors...
Well, that should've been the case to begin with...
Does this mean he won through sheer talent on the piano?!!
But it...
It shouldn't have been possible...
To rate such unique talent against others!
How...did such a thing happen??!!
Ichi...
Ichinose won??!!
WOW
WOW

Isn't that the point of having the special prizes??!!
Shu...
What's with him? He looks so happy...?!
Shuhei...?!!
It's as if he himself had won...!!
He's acting like a child...
Haha...

"Sto lat" is a Polish song that expresses good wishes.
♪ STO~ LAT ♪
♪ STO~ LAT
The first time was...when the folks at Nastrój wished me good luck before the Finals.
This is the second time I've heard it sung...
What should I do?! I want to look up and answer them so badly...
What should I do?! My tears just won't stop!

Sto lat
Sto lat, sto lat,
Niech żyje, żyje nam.
Sto lat, sto lat,
Niech żyje, żyje nam,
Jeszcze raz, jeszcze raz,
Niech żyje, żyje nam,
Niech żyje nam !
<ENGLISH TRANSLATION>
100 YEARS, 100 YEARS,
MAY HE LIVE, LIVE AMONG US
100 YEARS, 100 YEARS,
MAY HE LIVE, LIVE AMONG US
ONCE AGAIN, ONCE AGAIN,
MAY HE LIVE, LIVE AMONG US,
MAY HE LIVE AMONG US!
Sto～lat♪
Sto～lat♪
Nie～ch zyje♪
zyje nam♪
Haha...
What a magical moment.
Grr...
Why...
Never dreamed that he would win.
Sto～lat♪
Sto～lat♪
Ah... This got me crying, too... That boy...
Fufu...
I bet even he himself...
Who would've thought we'd hear an entire chorus singing "Sto Lat" here?
It's moving, isn't it?

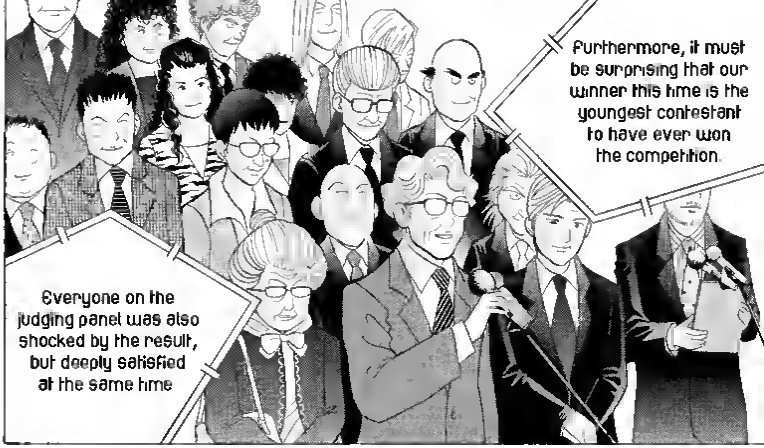
First prize slipped out of your fingers!
Why are you all smiles, Wei Pang?!
Are you gonna keep crying the whole time, Champion?!

*T/N. SINCE WEI PANG IS FLUENT IN JAPANESE I BELIEVE THIS CONVERSATION IS ACTUALLY IN JAPANESE WHICH IS WHY I'VE DECIDED TO KEEP THE SURNAME GIVEN NAME STRUCTURE USED BY BOTH CHINESE AND JAPANESE PEOPLE AS WELL AS RETAIN THE SUFFIX -SAN

I don't care if your performance was a miracle or a fluke...
it really had a huge impact on me.
Thank you very much.
It had a huge impact on me, too.
I'd like to think that my performance was not a fluke,
But the result is definitely a miracle.
Haha... Perhaps.
Well... The judges are only human, after all.
What...
What's there to smile about?!

That concludes the announcement of the results.
Congratulations to all prizewinners.
Damn it all!

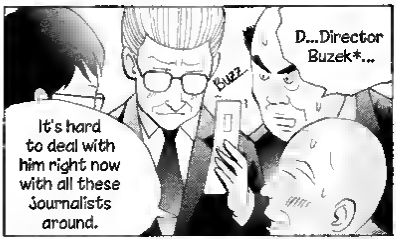
The level of this year's competition was very high.
Those who were not able to win a prize must not let this get you down. Please have pride in yourselves as finalists.
And continue your performing careers from here on out!!


Furthermore, it must be surprising that our winner this time is the youngest contestant to have ever won the competition.
Everyone on the judging panel was also shocked by the result, but deeply satisfied at the same time

They're demanding to know why Wei Pang didn't win...
Sounds pretty murderous. What should we do?
Mr... Mr. Kong.
The higher-ups are on the phone.

We look forward to your future endeavors...
Like I know!
Mr... Mr. Kong!
Tell them to ask Wei Pang himself!

Also, we cordially invite you to attend the Prize-Awarding Ceremony and Gala Concert tomorrow.
The results are available for confirmation on the screen...
Would journalists with questions please move to the venue for the press conference...
Now...
CHAIRMAN JASIŃSKI!
PLEASE TELL US THE METHOD USED IN THE FINAL ADJUDICATION!



EXPLAIN HOW FIRST PRIZE WAS GIVEN TO THE YOUNGEST WINNER IN THE HISTORY OF THIS COMPETITION!!
HOW WAS THE WINNER OF EACH PRIZE DECIDED?
PLEASE EXPLAIN THAT IN GREAT DETAIL!

*T/N: THE DIRECTOR OF THE FRYDERYK CHOPIN INSTITUTE THE ORGANIZER OF THE CHOPIN COMPETITION

Th...
This is...
Hmm.
This seems to call for another vote, doesn't it?
That does seem to be the case!

1.	Kai ICHINOSE	1.42
2.	Wei PANG	1.47
3.	Allegra GRANADOS	3.63
4.	Lech SZYMANOWSKI	3.68
5.	Aubrey THEISS	4.84
6.	Sophie ORMESSON	6.11
7.	Chang Woo AN	6.89
8.	Olesha YUSHCHENKO	8.05
9.	Chang Soo AN	8.89
10.	Satoru MUKAI	10.10
11.	Evgenii DMITRIEV	11.16
12.	Daniel HUNT	11.63

1. Kai ICHINOSE 1.42
2. Wei PANG 1.47

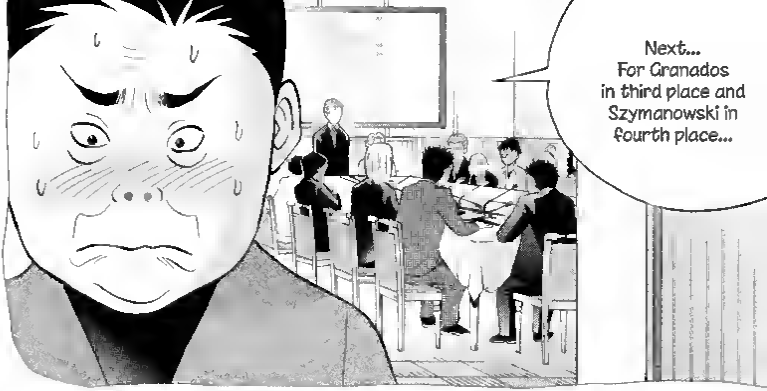
The results are as shown.
There is an extremely narrow margin between first and second place... as well as third and fourth place.
What should we do... Sir?
SIGH
Whaaaaa... Seriously? Ichinose?!
S...So first prize really goes to Ichinose...
We could da as the scares indicate and award Ichinase first prize...
Or have a final vate to resolve the deadlock between these twa...
Firstly, regarding the first two places...
Or leave first prize unawarded and have twa contestants in second place...
Or, we could have two winners for first prize...

THAT'S UNACCEPTABLE!
We can't have two winners either!
THERE HAS TO BE SOMEONE IN FIRST PLACE SINCE THE LEVEL IS SO HIGH THIS TIME!
Even if the difference is minimal, there should only be one winner in first place.
Glance
Then please raise your hand if you are in support of having a final vote...
But I put both of them in first place because I simply couldn't make up my mind!
Huh? What a coincidence! So did I!
Mr. Kong,
What do you say?
Is Mr. Kong trying to assert his influence by being here?
He'll want to turn around such a narrow margin without a final vote...

How many times has this guy given us trouble...?
.....
Don't tell me he's gonna overrule our adjudication.
As well as an official in the Operations Committee...
Even though he's the representative of the biggest sponsoring country for this year's competition...
Ack... Judging from that face, he's gonna give us a hard time...
In the end, money is all that matters, huh...

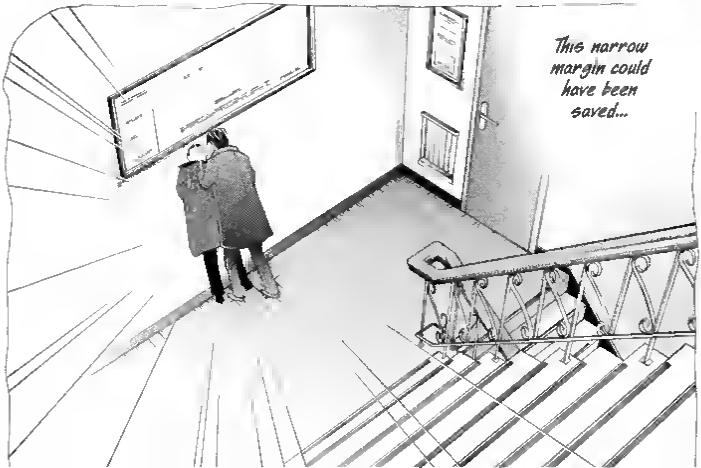
Please let us hear what you think regarding this matter, Mr. Kong.
This...
This is not really my area of expertise...
I shall leave the decision to the judges... So...

TURN
Huh? Mr. Kong?
In that case...
8.
9.
Soo AN
8
10
11
Would those who think we should comply with the rankings as indicated by the scores, please raise your hand.
Then the result shall be thus. Ichinose shall be in first place.


Next...
For Granados in third place and Szymanowski in fourth place...

Back then...
If I had called his bluff...

Dammit.
That bastard Wei Fang


The narrow margin could have been saved...

I'll expose everything you've done to the entire world.
Swear that you won't interfere in the competition again!!
Making use of Hao Pang's accident to abduct me...
Or else, I'll...
Blowing up a factory, not to mention murder...
How many people died in that accident??!
Ah... I see.
Even that accident was staged by you, wasn't it?!
Humph.
No one's gonna take your bullshit.
Don't... That wasn't my doing.

You're finished.
Do you want to live as a fugitive?!
If you don't fancy that, wash your hands of everything to do with the adjudication!!
Damn!
And we were so close, too!
Do you have any idea how much this has cost you?
You'll regret this for the rest of your life!!
Why didn't you answer my call?!
....
....
....
Huh? Piotr?!
....
....
Sto Lat END

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by ISSHIKI Makoto
一色まこと

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Kai won.

Ichinose-san?
Reiko-san... did you hear?
Kai

I under-stand!
So happy I'm almost scared...
But I'm...
I never expected things to turn out this way either...

Y...Yes!
I heard, Sensei!

You'll definitely get to meet the champion
Sensei...
I want to see you, Sensei...
Right now...
Sure. But right now is a bit impossible.
But once we return to Japan...

1 Kai ICHINOSE
2 Wei PANG
3 Allegra GRANADOS
Lech SZYMANOWSKI
5 Aubrey THEISS
6 Sophie ORMESSON
best performance of a polonaise Wei PA
best performance of mazurkas Ka
パシャ
パシャ
Not only did our Kai...

"KAI WON THREE OUT OF THE FOUR SPECIAL AWARDS. BEST MAZURKA, BEST CONCERTO, AND BEST SONATA

I've lost count how many people...
I've randomly hugged...
So overjoyed...
I'm simply...
Ahaha
And hugged...
And hugged...
And hugged...
Congratulations !!
Congratulations ! Ichinose !
C'mon... That wasn't so bad, was it?
Don't look like you just made a big mistake!
Ah

CONGRATULATIONS, MR. ICHINOSE!
WAS WINNING THREE SPECIAL AWARDS WITHIN YOUR EXPECTATION?!
HOW ARE YOU FEELING?!
I can't share this moment with Ajino...
As I'm drowning in this sea of interviews and "congratulations".
Where on earth is Ajino...
Ajino!
Where is Ajino?

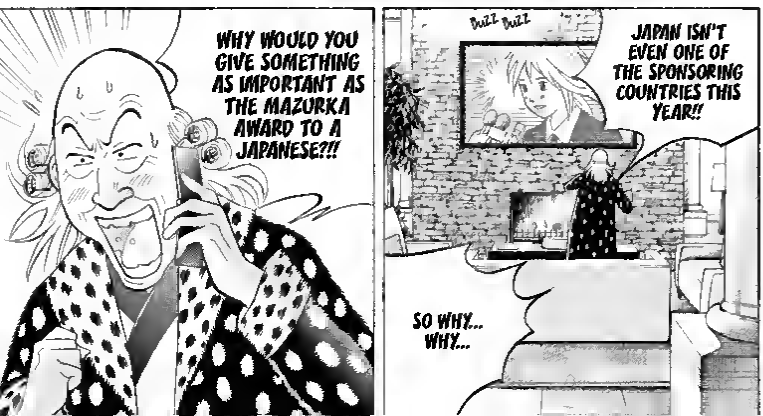
He's stuck in an even worse position...
Looks like he's gonna have a hard time dealing with that...
IS ICHINOSE'S PARTICIPATION IN THIS COMPETITION MEANT TO BE YOUR REVENGE?
WOULD YOU SAY ICHINOSE HAS INHERITED YOUR PIANO PLAYING?
He has completely fallen prey to the media.
The story of him making a comeback as the winner's mentor is perfect gossip material, after all.
Humph

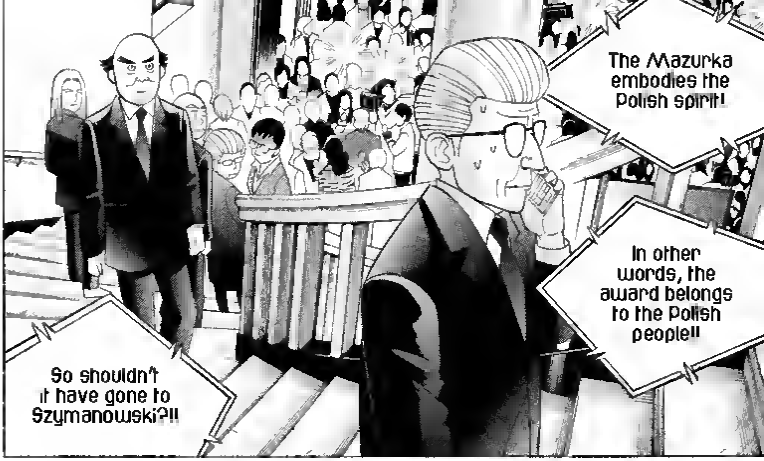
Compared to that strange article about Pang,
This might even be juicier.
WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF WEI PANG'S PLAYING?!
AND WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF ICHINOSE'S VICTORY OVER WEI PANG?
Kicking up a fuss is all Sousuke can do!
The media is publicizing what he says all over the world!!
Then why don't you go and get him outta there?
Whaaat?! No, no, no!!
Ajino, are you all right?
Kai is not my proxy.
I believe there is actually an element of luck in his victory.
And Wei Pang's playing is absolutely wonderful in itself...
Ajino.

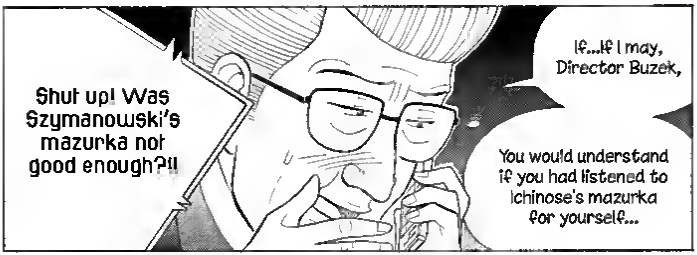
Looks like our long day...
Won't be over any time soon!!
YEAHHH!
Jan, let's party till morning at your place!
What is the meaning of this?
Explain, Piotr!

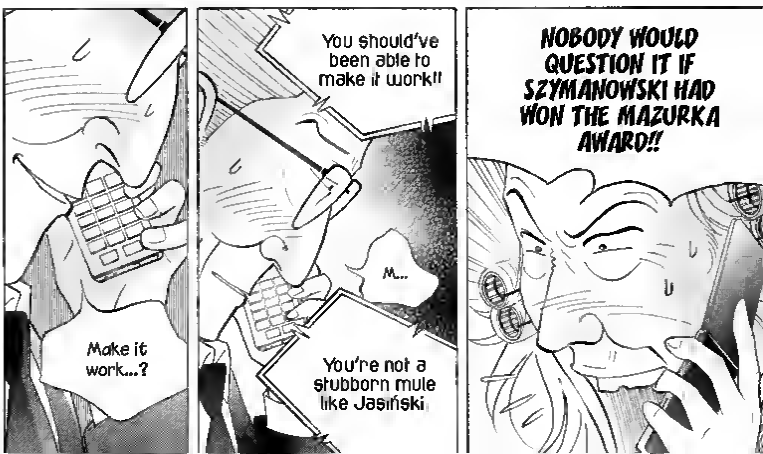
.....
.....
BUSTLE
BUSTLE
It wouldn't be such a strange thing if Szymanowski had won,
So why had first place gone to that young Japanese?!!

I WOULD UNDER-STAND IF IT HAD BEEN PANG..

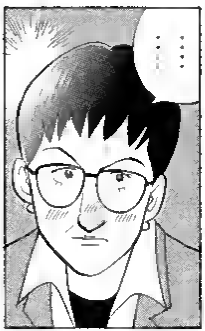

WHY WOULD YOU GIVE SOMETHING AS IMPORTANT AS THE MAZURKA AWARD TO A JAPANESE?!!
BuiZ BuiZ
JAPAN ISN'T EVEN ONE OF THE SPONSORING COUNTRIES THIS YEAR!!
SO WHY... WHY...


The Mazurka embodies the Polish spirit!
In other words, the award belongs to the Polish people!!
So shouldn't it have gone to Szymanowski?!!


If...if I may, Director Buzek,
You would understand if you had listened to Ichinose's mazurka for yourself...
Shut up! Was Szymanowski's mazurka not good enough?!!


NOBODY WOULD QUESTION IT IF SZYMANOWSKI HAD WON THE MAZURKA AWARD!!
You should've been able to make it work!!
M...
You're not a stubborn mule like Jasiński
Make it work...?

LIKE HELL I COULD!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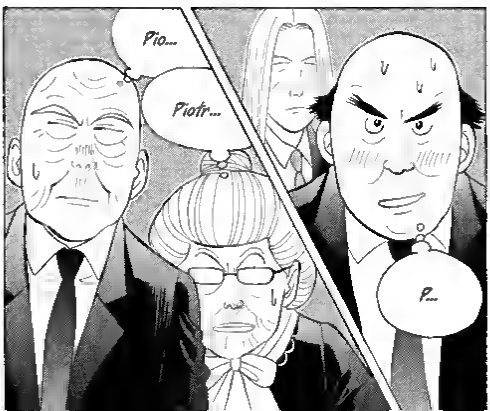
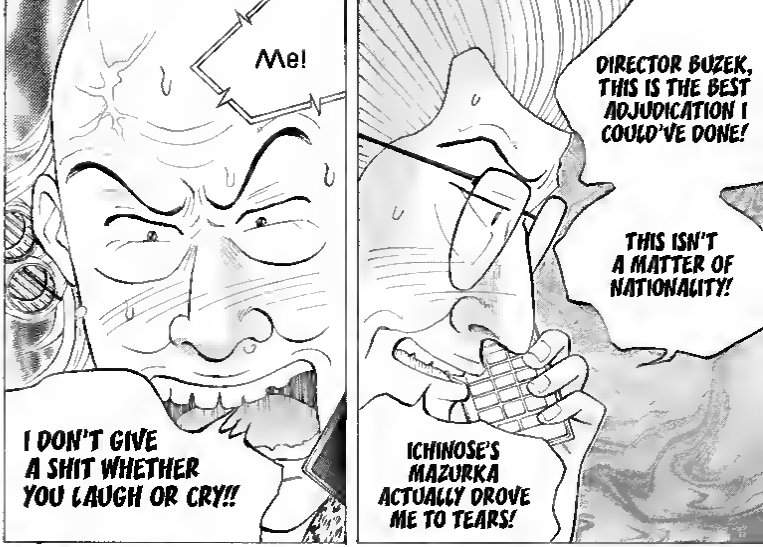
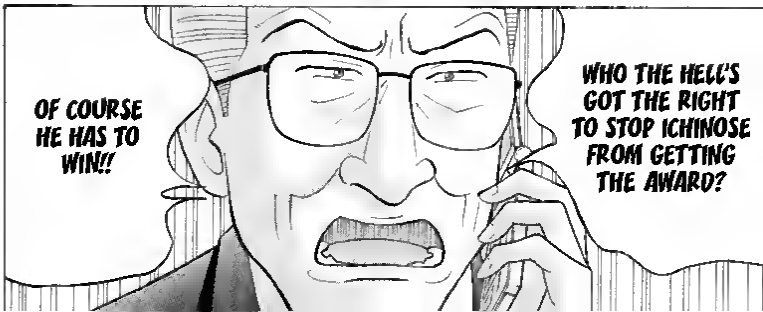
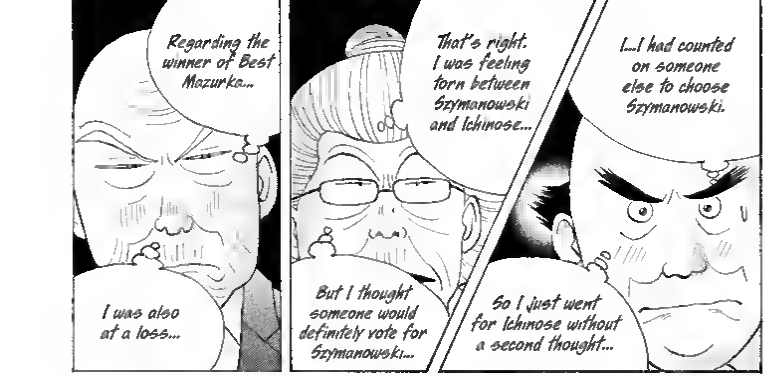
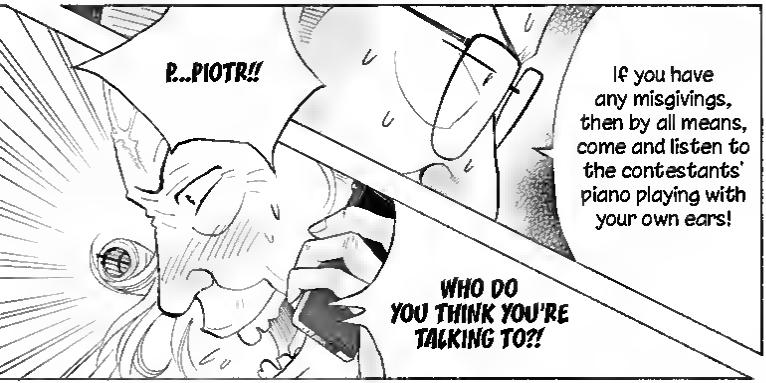

Pio...
Piotr...
P...


Me!
I DON'T GIVE A SHIT WHETHER YOU LAUGH OR CRY!!
ICHINOSE'S MAZURKA ACTUALLY DROVE ME TO TEARS!
DIRECTOR BUZEK, THIS IS THE BEST ADJUDICATION I COULD'VE DONE!
THIS ISN'T A MATTER OF NATIONALITY!

SO TELL ME...
THE AWARD WASN'T GIVEN BY ME ALONE.
IT WAS A UNANIMOUS DECISION MADE BY THE WHOLE PANEL.

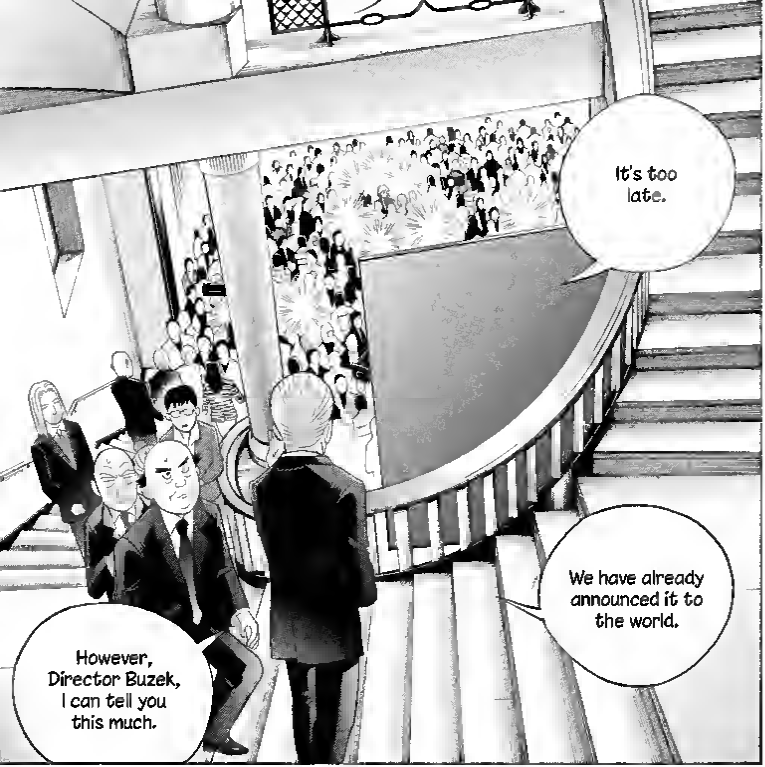

OF COURSE HE HAS TO WIN!!
WHO THE HELL'S GOT THE RIGHT TO STOP ICHINOSE FROM GETTING THE AWARD?


Regarding the winner of Best Mazurka...
I was also at a loss...
That's right. I was feeling torn between Szymanowski and Ichinose...
But I thought someone would definitely vote for Szymanowski...
I...I had counted on someone else to choose Szymanowski.
So I just went for Ichinose without a second thought...


P...PIOTR!!
If you have any misgivings, then by all means, come and listen to the contestants' piano playing with your own ears!
WHO DO YOU THINK YOU'RE TALKING TO?!

If you have anything against Jasinski, feel free to talk to Andrzej...
And here I was gonna appoint you as the next Chairman of the Judging Panel

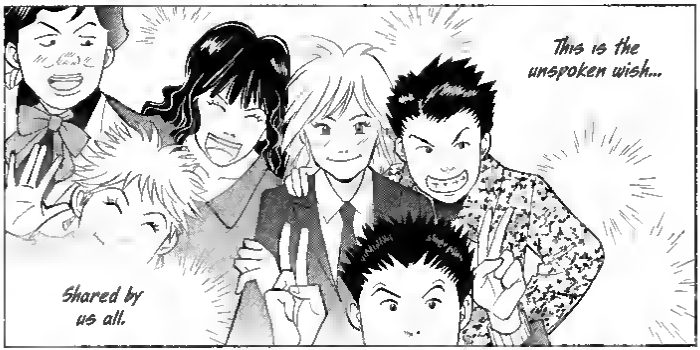
I won't betray music ever again.
What are you talking about, Piotr?! You don't seem to understand...
THIS YOUNG JAPANESE HAS NO TRACK RECORD, NO GUARANTEE. THERE ARE PRECEDENT CASES! HE COULD VERY WELL HAVE REACHED THE APEX OF HIS CAREER ALREADY!
WHEREAS SZYMANOWSKI HAS THE SUPPORT OF HIS COUNTRY, AND PANG ALREADY HAS THE MAKING OF A STAR...
Nobody can tell the future. I'm sorry, but...
OR HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN?! THE WINNER IS FATED TO BECOME A STAR FROM THE MOMENT HE OR SHE WINS THE COMPETITION!
YOU THINK ICHINOSE CAN BEAR SUCH A HEAVY RESPONSIBILITY?! YOU THINK HE CAN ACTUALLY BECOME A STAR?!!


It's too late.
We have already announced it to the world.
However, Director Buzek, I can tell you this much.

Ichinose's victory this year is beyond reproach.
He is a worthy winner of this competition!
So please, Director, take pride in...

Clap Clap
Well said, Piotr!
Clap Clap
Clap Clap
Piotr, this result will endanger us all...
Snap
Beep
Haha... I was just saying things as they were.
Clap Clap Clap Clap
I'm seeing you in new light, Piotr.
The winner of the Chopin Competition...

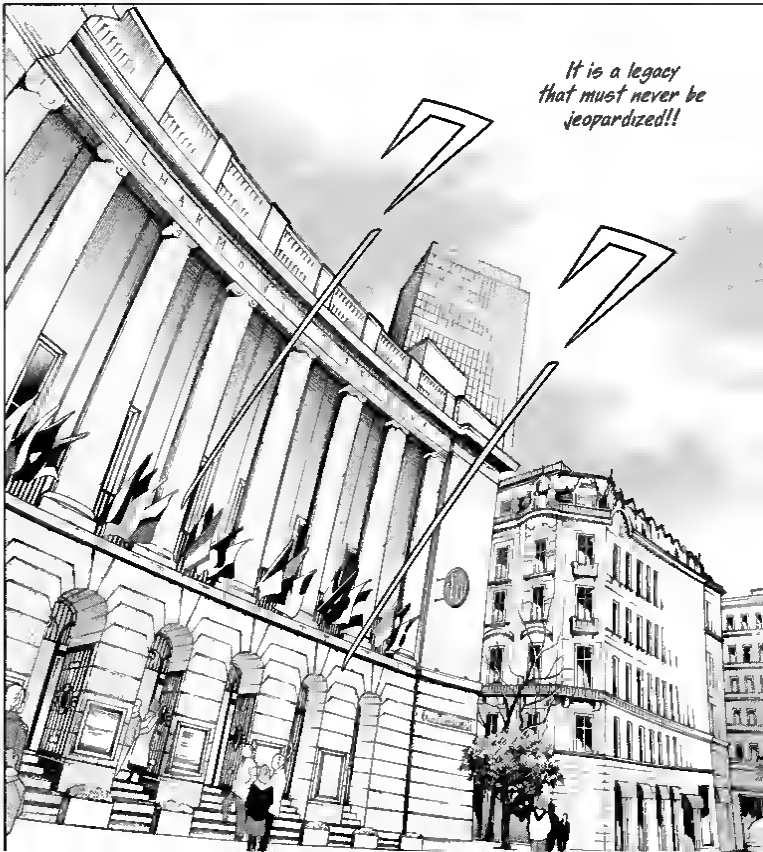
Must become a star.


This is the unspoken wish...
Shared by us all.

We can't. It's already 1 am, you know!
Then home it is.
Tomorrow is the Prize-Awarding Ceremony and the Gala Concert.
After all...
Haha.

Then how about a quiet meal?
What now? Wanna go partying?
Hell no. It was bad enough getting myself out of that crowd.

This is the only way to keep the history of this venerable and authoritative competition alive!!
Gosh...
I just want to sleep in my own bed tonight!


It is a legacy that must never be jeopardized!!

Uh... To wrap things up...
As the organizer of this competition,
Witnessing the birth of the youngest winner in our history
Nothing gives me more pleasure than
I extend my deepest gratitude to all the participants and everyone who has been a part of this year's competition
For Director Buzek's address
And that's all...

Now let's move onto the Prize-Awarding Ceremony

The ceremony is held in honor of the twelve finalists...
As well as the winner of the Audience Award,

Chosen in an online poll by members of the audience...
Out of all the contestants who did not qualify for the Finals.

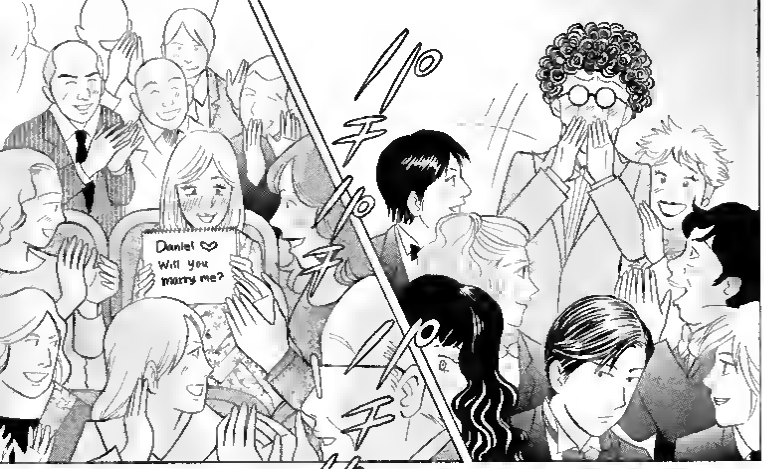
KAROL ADAMSKI
Adamski won the award in a landslide
Congratulations, Adamski!
Good for you, Adamski! Congratulations!!
This is only to be expected!!

CHANG-SOO AN
Next are the finalists...
Who fought their way past the Preliminaries, the First Round, the Second Round...
EVGENII DMITRIEV
But unfortunately could not rank in top six.
CHANG-WOO AN
Out of 286 contestants from 35 participating countries this year...
SATORU MUKAI
It is regrettable,
DANIEL HUNT
Of course,

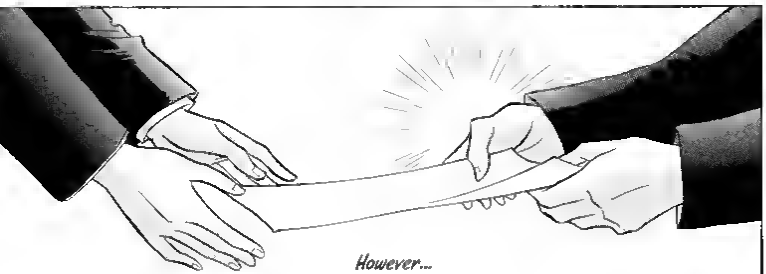
But they are all rising pianists...
With talent befitting finalists!
It's Sarah! Look at her!
Huh?
Daniel, Daniel!
You see that? Down there in the auditorium?
Huh?

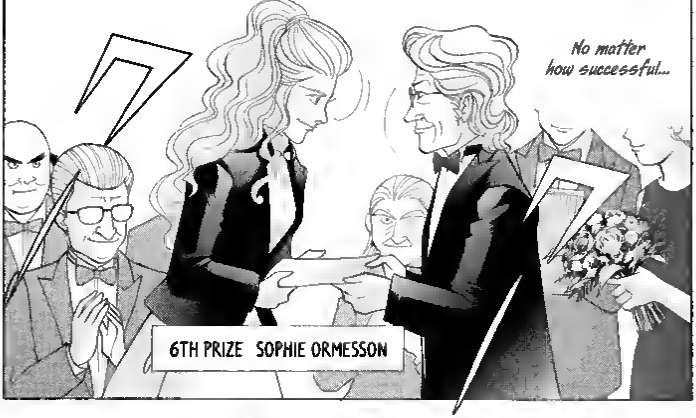
Huh?
Daniel
will you
marry me?

Daniel
Will you
marry me?


Daniel ♡
Will you marry me?

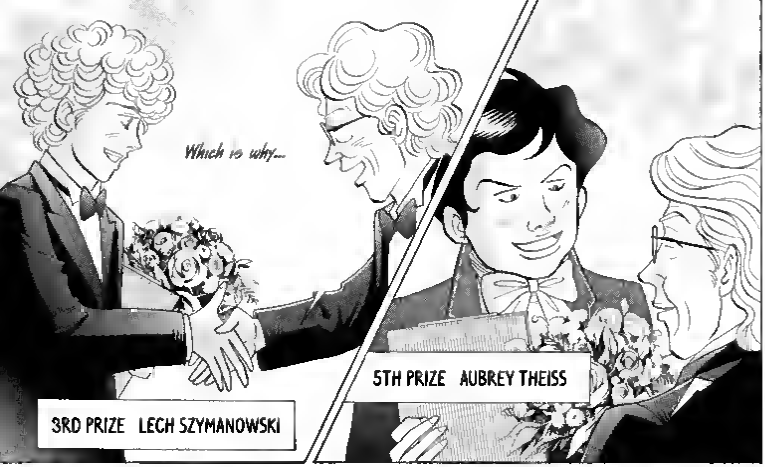
This year's competition has been a great success blessed with wonderful contestants.

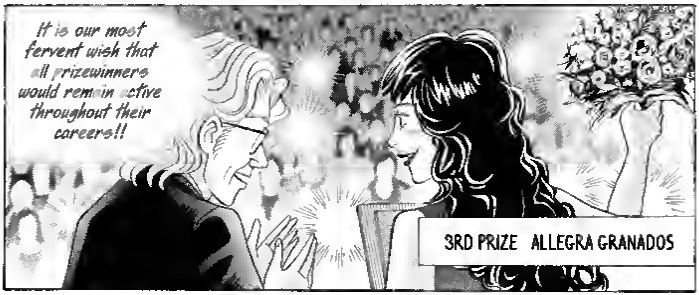

However...


No matter how successful...
6TH PRIZE SOPHIE ORMESSON

Or famous a competition is,
SOPHIE!
WOOHOO

If it cannot produce stars consistently,
Its reputation will one day be lost.


Which is why...
3RD PRIZE LECH SZYMANOWSKI
5TH PRIZE AUBREY THEISS

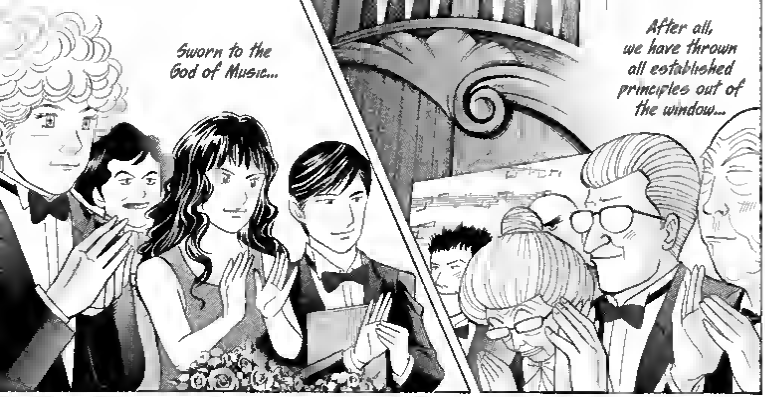

It is our most fervent wish that all prizewinners would remain active throughout their careers!!
3RD PRIZE ALLEGRA GRANADOS

The level of our attention and expectation on the champion is especially high.

2ND PRIZE WEI PANG

There have been some who could not bear the heavy responsibility...
And vanished without a trace all of a sudden.
1ST PRIZE KAI ICHINOSE

So please, Ichinose!
Don't ever disappear!!


Sworn to the God of Music...
After all, we have thrown all established principles out of the window...

And chosen you, who are entirely one of a kind!
So please...
WOOOOP
WAAAA!

You absolutely must not crumble!!
WOOHOO

For being the one who noticed Kai's talent earlier than anyone else.
I'm also proud of myself...
I'm proud of Kai for giving Dad a run for his money.
I'm still on cloud nine today!
Kai!!
That's right... It's been off the whole night...
His cell has been off the whole time, hasn't it?
So when can we get in touch with Ichinose-kun?
Kai!!
Nakao, the Musician Hand Doctor, is finally here!!!
He was probably busy receiving toasts till morning.
In any case, looks like it will have to wait till the Gala Concert is over.
K...
A Winner's Fate END

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PIANO NO MORI

by ISSHIKI Makoto
一色まこと

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Piano no Mori ch 235

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Chapter 235

Things Will Surely Go Well

Kai, big news!!
At this very moment...

Dr. Nakao is here, right in this hall!!!!

K. Kai probably didn't know about this either...
Who'd have thought...he'd come all the way to Warsaw...
Ba-dump
Ba-dump
Ba-dump

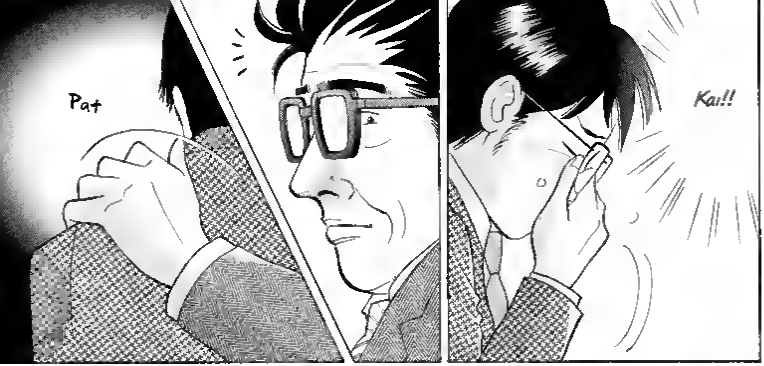
As the Prize-Awarding Ceremony comes to an end...
It's the start of the Gala Concert, given by the prizewinners.
Sophieeee

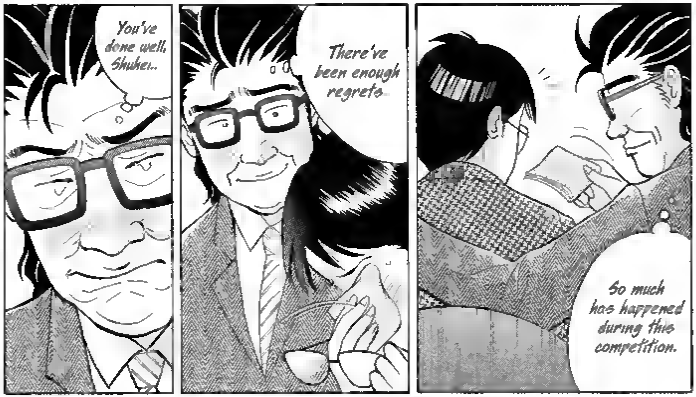
SOPHIE ORMESSON
SCHERZO NO. 2 IN B-FLAT MINOR, OP. 31
But I hardly care about that anymore.
He's come to fulfill his promise!
There's no mistake. It's Dr. Nakao!!
Three days ago.
Kai dropped that bombshell of a confession on me...

Dr. Nakao is the man to go to if you want a musician's hand healed.
That's right!!
Kai wins first prize.
He agreed to perform the surgery that Kai wanted on the condition that...
That means...
Ba-dump
Ba-dump
And Kai actually did it!

Kai's wish is gonna come true!!

I had thought he was crazy...
But it really is gonna come true!!!


Pat
Kai!!


You've done well, Shuhei..
There've been enough regrets.
So much has happened during the competition.

All the performances are going right over my head...

As soon as possible.
I just want to let Kai know about this...
Encore
Encore

Today's programme consists of relatively short pieces...
Including today, the Gala Concert will go on for three days...
GALA CONCERT

AUBREY THEISS
BALLADE NO. 1 IN G MINOR, OP. 23

After this, it's the intermission!

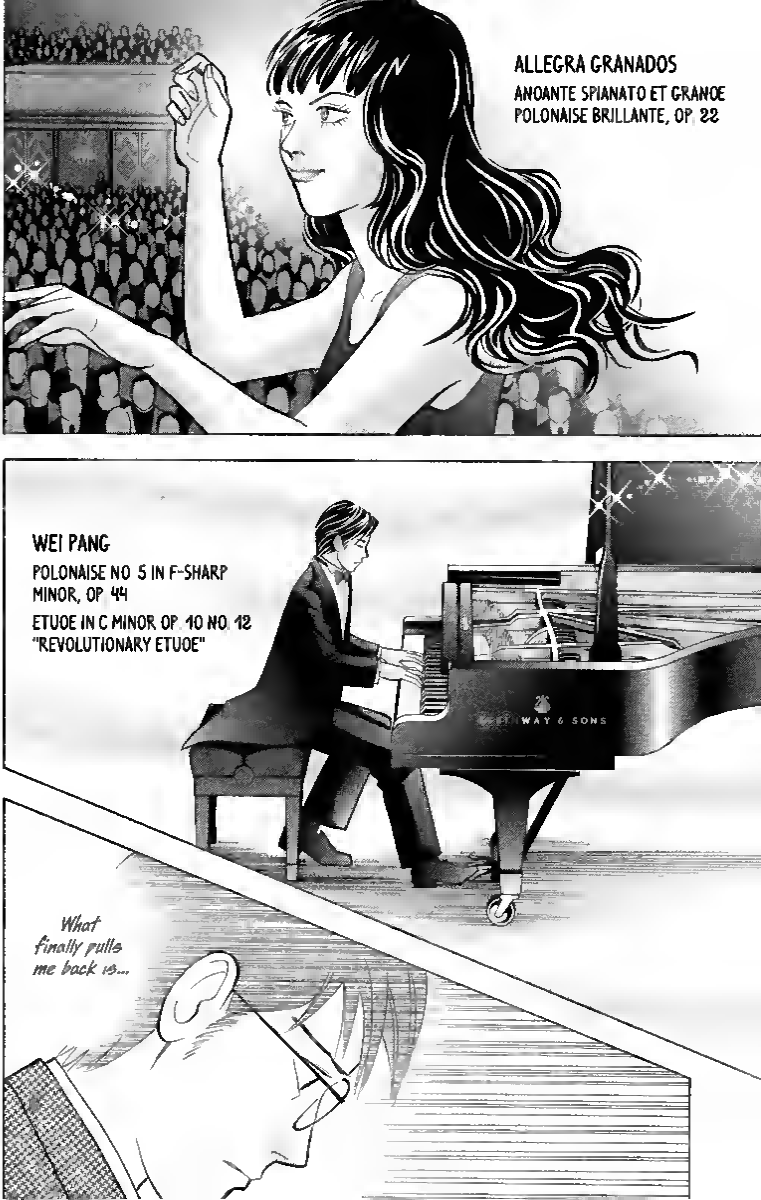
Excuse me.
MUTTER MUTTER
Please let me through.

Hey, are you all right?
A-

BUMP
But I can't go and see Kai now.
Whoa!

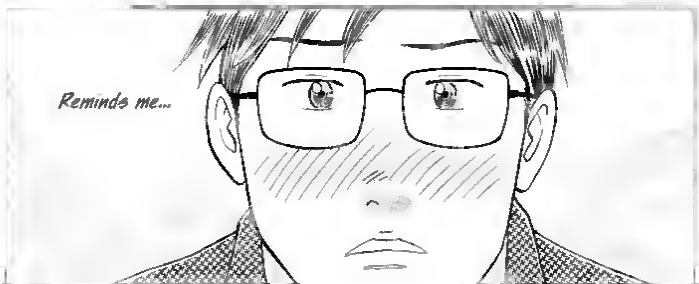
Kai hasn't told him anything about this!
Ah...
Is everything okay?
I...I can't tell Sensei...
Ajino-sensei!
What's wrong? Why are you in such a rush...?
You've been humoring the folks by playing the piano all night, after all...
Last night must have been really tough for you, Amamiya-kun!
You must be exhausted!
There'll be another drinking party tonight! Think you can handle that, Amamiya-kun?
Kai
But since Kai turned in early...
W-Well... I-I wonder...

I can't even focus on Lech's performance after the intermission.
Lech!
I keep imagining what's gonna happen from now on...
Which gets me all worked up...
LECH SZYMANOWSKI
24 PRELUDES
NO 7~12, OP 28


ALLEGRA GRANADOS
ANOANTE SPIANATO ET GRANDE
POLONAISE BRILLANTE, OP. 22
WEI PANG
POLONAISE NO. 5 IN F-SHARP MINOR, OP. 44
ETUDE IN C MINOR OP. 10 NO. 12 "REVOLUTIONARY ETUDE"
WAY & SONS
What finally pulls me back is...

Liszt's...
Wei Pang's encore piece...
La Campanella.

Wei Pang's Campanella...


Reminds me...

Of that time when Kai played the piece for me.
Back then, it made my entire body shiver with goose bumps.
It took everything to stop myself from running away, to take it head-on...

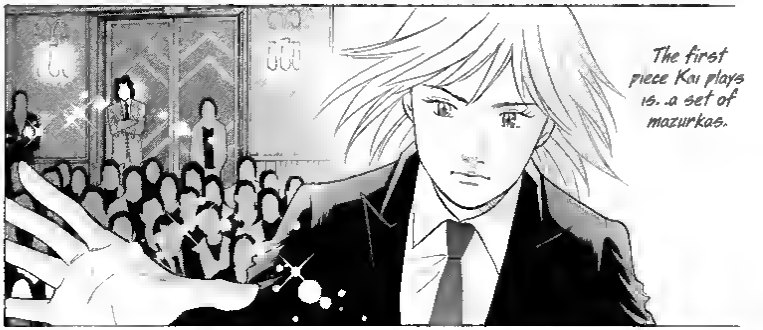
It feels more like a decade
I... Just how childish was I?
It's only been a year, but so much has happened..
It's been a year since then..
Has soothed...
But now, listening to Pang's Campanella...
My troubled heart.

Kai.
Bravoooo
Things will surely go well!
Life is full of surprises.
We may have wept every time Fate toyed with us...
Peaaay
Bravooo

But, Kai!!
Right now, I have a feeling that everything will go well!
After all, you...
Have won the Chopin Competition!!
ナナ

If you could manage such a feat...
There's nothing that you can't achieve!!

MAREK BUZEK
DIRECTOR OF THE FRYDERYK CHOPIN INSTITUTE
Well then, let me hear the playing of the crowned winner!!


The first piece Kai plays is...a set of mazurkas.

Playing the mazurka...
Ahh... I get to listen to this piece today.. I can die happy...

This is indeed...
Is the duty of the winner of the Mazurka Award.

: KAI ICHINOSE
MAZURKAS, OP. 50

Kraaooo
Kaaa

Please feel free to use this...
Oh... Then I'll help myself...
Ichinose will be playing Concerto No. 1 tomorrow,
And Pang will play No. 2 the day after!
The two pieces, and the encore... Everything he played was splendid!
The ma-zurkas really were amazing, weren't they?
You tell me!
Looks like he can't be reached on the phone.

Sorry to be blunt, but Ichinose's victory was not decided till 11pm last night!
Huuuuh?
You should've arranged for a meeting with him beforehand.
Just how useless are you?
Huh?
Isn't that Ajino Sousuke over there?!
Ichinose-kun's teacher...
And weren't you the one wha ...
Is...
Then this makes it much easier!
Things Will Surely Go Well - END

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Chapter 236

About Kai's Future

If we can't find Ichinose-kun, we can simply talk to his teacher!
Problem solved!
Huh?
What do you mean?
We don't know whether he has informed Mr. Ajino about this...
Ask Ichinose-kun first!
P-Please hold on a second!
If he hasn't, and we just barge in on him...

If we stick around Sensei, Ichinose-kun will come without us having to look for him!
Not to mention, I'm short on time.
B...But we should still...exercise more caution regarding this matter...
N-N-No...
He'll have to find out sooner or later. It makes no difference.
GRAB!
Anyway, we will prepare a perfect stage!
So if time allows, I would like the talks to start as soon as possible!

Then I hope you will consider it most favorably...
I will have to discuss with him...
I'm sorry, but this ought to be discussed at length with Ichinose himself.
Please get in touch with him some other day.
Hmm. What to do? This is kind of overwhelming.
3...4...5 recitals!
This is amazing! In such a short time, Kai has already been invited to give...
Then there are the interviews...
I'm not very suited for the job though.
Still, we should really consider getting him a proper manager!
Looks like you'll have to step in as Kai's manager for the time being, Sousuke!

Excuse me!
It'll be a bother if you get pinned down again.
In any case, let's get out of here.
Mr. Ajino Sousuke, I presume?
Con-gratulations on Ichinose's victory!
Th...Thank you very much.
Y...Yes, that's right.
The sixth...?

Huh?
Musician Hand Doctor...
Here is my card.
Sorry for not introducing myself earlier.
Nakao Shinjirou
The doctor...
Ah!!
Has come in person??!!
N...No way??!!
He has come to fulfill his promise with Kai?!!
In other words,
Gasp

My, my... I've heard all about you...
It is an honor to meet you.
So this is Monsieur Jean-Jacques Serrault, the world-class maestro!
Ack... He recognized me even in this getup.
Ah...
Kai hasn't told Sousuke about this!!
This is very, very bad!!!
Arghhh!! This is bad!!
Chatter Chatter
Ah...
This is the orthopedic expert to those in the know...
My...
My name is Nashimoto. Pleased to meet you.
Ah, that's him.
The one who treated Kai...
Could you be...

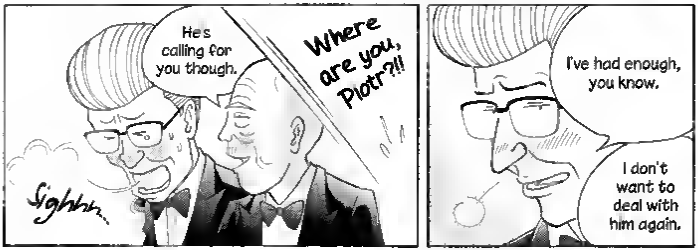
Thank you very much for taking care of Ichinose!
You are very welcome. And congratulations!
If it isn't too much trouble, let's move somewhere else. This is going to take a while...
Actually... This isn't really a good place to talk.
The future which lies ahead of the first Japanese champion of the Chopin Competition.
I would like to talk about...

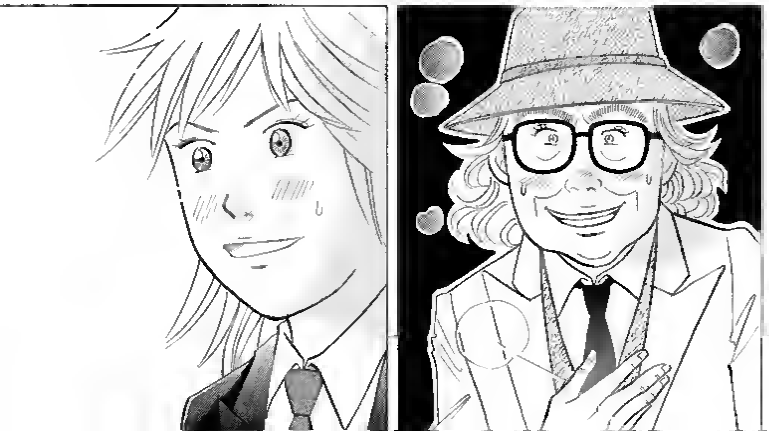
Huh?
Kai's future...?

Well then,
Congratulations
A toast to the success of the first day of the Gala Concert!
Congratulati

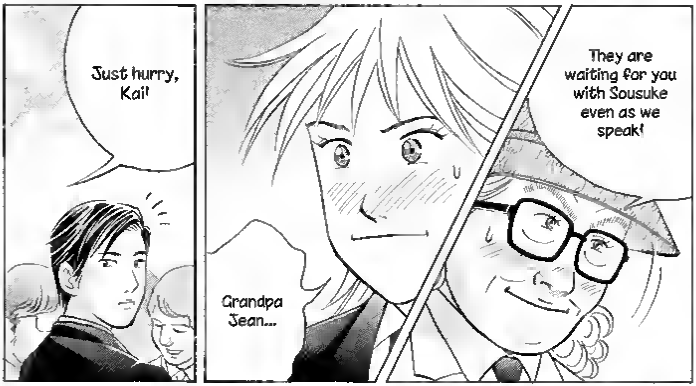
CHEERS!!!

Director Buzek's mood seems to have improved a great deal...
And his murderous glower disappeared once he listened to Ichinose's playing.
Things turned out quite nicely, don't you think, Piotr?


He's calling for you though.
Where are you, Piotr?!!
Sighhh...
I've had enough, you know.
I don't want to deal with him again.



D...Dr. Nakao is here?!
Yeah!!
With Dr. Nashimoto?!
That's right!


Just hurry, Kai!
They are waiting for you with Sousuke even as we speak!
Grandpa Jean...

Well, Mr. Pang,
We're really looking forward to your Concerto No. 2 the day after tomorrow.
Ah... Thank you very much.
I'll do my best!

I didn't expect him to come all this way...
TAXI
WB
....
What?!!
I hear he's been watching your performances live since the Second Round.
But why...
I...was actually planning to visit him in the United States, bringing my certificate with me.
That is to say, he had intended to perform the surgery to begin with, regardless of the result.
But he does have a point!
He said watching you on the internet wasn't enough for him!
Fufu

So we're just as bad as the other!
But then again, I would've gone to the States anyway even if I hadn't passed the Preliminaries,
Hahaha.
Arghhhh... He got me!
I completely fell for it!
That's why I said...
After all, having a doctor tell him "we need ta talk about Kai's future...
Must have set off some terrible alarms for him.
Still, Sousuke is probably fretting like mad right now...
Well, at least it turned out all right in the end!
Humph.
Will you be all right, Kai?
Yeah, it'll be fine!
Yeah.
It would feel like taking a plunge from Heaven to Hell.

Yeah.
I'll make sure he understands!
Think you can clear things up with Sousuke?
Ichinose's playing is absolutely divine!!!
GLOMP
He really is the champion!! He's gonna be a real star!!
WHOAAAA!
AHHHH!! PIOTR!!

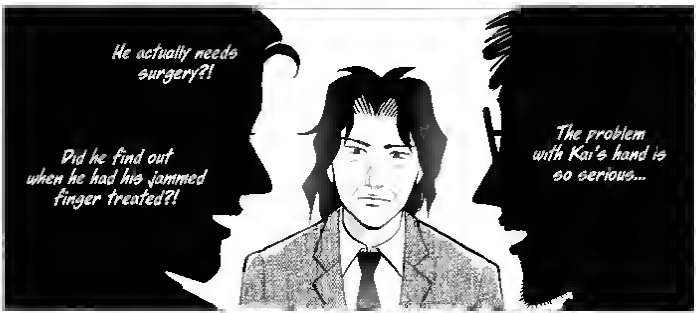
Hmm?
By the by, where is my dear boy Ichinose?
I've been looking everywhere for him...
I'm very glad that you approve of the result, Director Buzek!
I approve!! Of course I approve!!
WHAAAAAAT?!
Huh?
Director! Ichinose had already excused himself because of some urgent business...
And here I've been looking forward to asking him to play the mazurkas again...
What should I do, Piotr?!
You must bear with it for now, Director! You can definitely ask him tomorrow! I promise!

SOFITEL
SOFITEL

Goes hand in hand with the advancement of endoscopic surgery.
In other words, the recent development of surgical science...

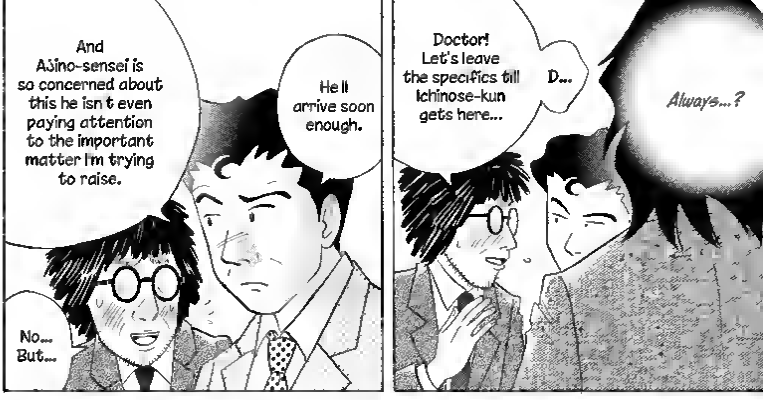
Got it. Right away!
Show him.
And this little something that I invented myself has a huge impact on hand surgeries!
....

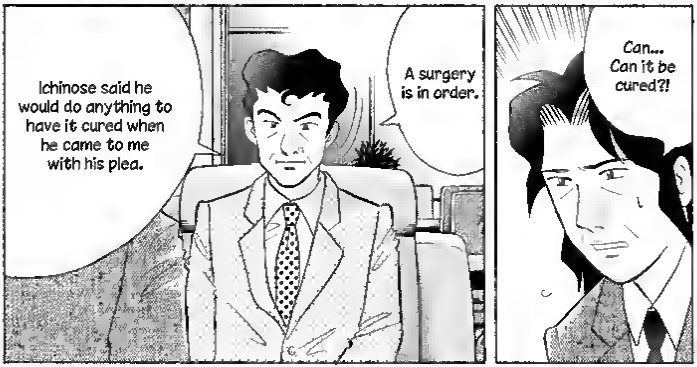
Yes! It is indeed a great invention!
Isn't that right, Nashimoto-kun?
With the utilization of this kind of special endoscopic tools, hand surgery has evolved dramatically.
That's right. This is it.

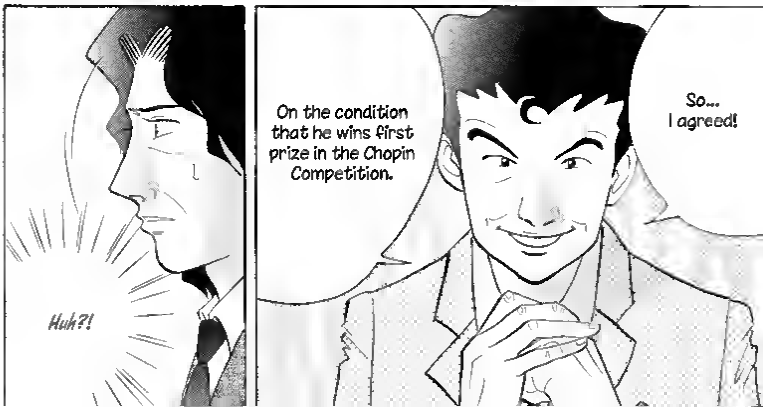

He actually needs surgery?!
Did he find out when he had his jammed finger treated?!
The problem with Kai's hand is so serious...

His performances ought to have proven that, and it definitely wouldn't have escaped me if there were anything wrong with him.
They are.
"Kai's hands are fine, right?"

But will potentially affect him in the future!
Then it could be...a condition that hasn't yet developed...
But for an orthopedic hand surgeon to bring up his future...
It must be a serious problem...for a reputable doctor like you to be involved...
What exactly is the matter with Ichinose's hand?
May I ask...
Then through Nashimoto-kun, he found me.
Ichinose has always been looking for doctors.
Doctors specializing in treating hands who are good at their job.
Let me start from the beginning.
Hmm.


And Ajino-sensei is so concerned about this he isn't even paying attention to the important matter I'm trying to raise.
He'll arrive soon enough.
No... But...
Doctor! Let's leave the specifics till Ichinose-kun gets here...
D...
Always...?


Ichinose said he would do anything to have it cured when he came to me with his plea.
A surgery is in order.
Can... Can it be cured?!


Huh?!
On the condition that he wins first prize in the Chopin Competition.
So... I agreed!

What...
What did you say...?
I told him he would only be able to afford the surgical fees with the prize money of the champion!

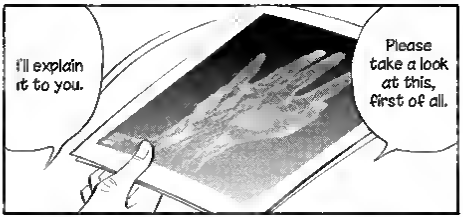
This man
Because it wasn't really worth my attention.
I was just trying to put him off,
After all, he couldn't possibly have won under normal circumstances!
You have every reason to be angry!

I don't know how reputable he is, but how dare he trample on others' dignity...!
Calm down!
Calm down!
To think he actually named such an outrageous condition...

So Nashimoto-kun has done whatever he could to acquire and verify these medical records for me.
After all, I did not make the diagnosis myself.
Besides, I can't guarantee a full recovery after the procedure...
I'm guessing you've already realized that the surgery is not of the urgent kind.
But I can't jump to any conclusions before diagnosing the patient myself.
Of course.
You have only come because you deem it possible, right?
But...
I will do my utmost best.
In any case, Kai's hand has to be examined as soon as possible...

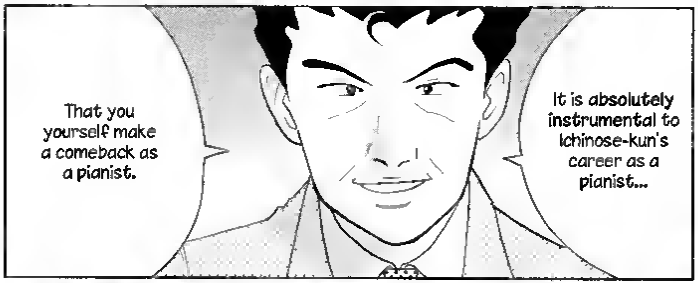
To give you some idea about the current condition...
We should now focus on achieving the best result.
I have already prepared for every possibility.
TAXI

Is the surgery difficult?


I'll explain it to you.
Please take a look at this, first of all.

All we need is this little widget of my design!
But what used to be an impossible procedure is very much achievable now.
After all, it's an injury sustained in an accident 20... or 25 years ago?
It certainly isn't easy.

Ajino-san,
?


That you yourself make a comeback as a pianist.
It is absolutely instrumental to Ichinose-kun's career as a pianist...

That's what he said when he requested for the surgery.
What?

For your left hand, which was injured in an accident.
But for you, Ajino-san.
The surgery in question isn't meant for Ichinose-kun...
Huh?!
My...
My...
Hand???!!

AJINO SOUSUKE
27
13

My...
Hand...??!!

Over here!
Hiya, Champion!
Here he comes, my client!
Ah...
Dr. Nashimoto...
Dr. Nakao...
Ah,
H...Hi!
So sorry for being late!

About Kai's Future END

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by ISSHIKI Makoto
一色まこと

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Right now I don't know what to think...
But...
I understand what you are saying,
Please give me a bit of time.
For having taken up so much of your precious time.
But... I'm deeply sorry...
Thank you.
Kai,

I need to talk to you!
Hold on, Ajino!
Ho...
TORIA

No.
Why would I be mad?

Hmm.
But I'm too tired for that today.

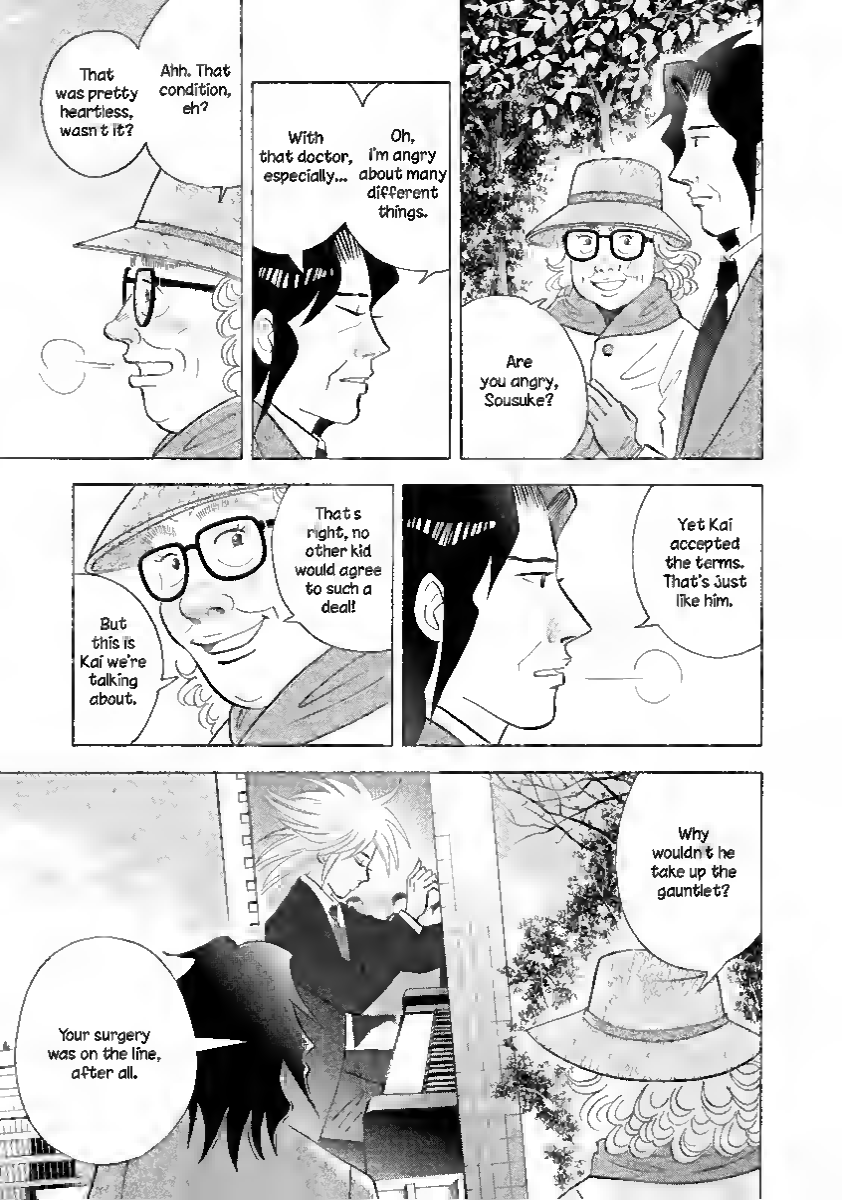
A...Are you mad?

Ajino...
That's right. I'm absolutely furious...
With myself!!

Chapter 237 Rivals for Life

Kai is moping because you won't get in touch, Sousuke.
He went to the rehearsal looking all miserable.
Jean.
You just knew, didn't you, Jean,
That you'd find me here.
It was just a coincidence!
When I heard there's a poster of Kai hanging on the wall of the Continental Hotel*...
I thought I'd come and take a proper look at it in this park.

*T/N: NO IT'S NOT A TYPO THOUGH THE BUILDING IS INDEED BASED OFF OF THE REAL INTER-CONTINENTAL HOTEL IN WARSAW


That was pretty heartless, wasn't it?
Ahh. That condition, eh?
With that doctor, especially...
Oh, I'm angry about many different things.
Are you angry, Sousuke?
That's right, no other kid would agree to such a deal!
But this is Kai we're talking about.
Yet Kai accepted the terms. That's just like him.
Why wouldn't he take up the gauntlet?
Your surgery was on the line, after all.

I understand how you feel, but don't let emotion muddle your judgment.
S...Still, he is a brilliant surgeon.
That's why you're so angry!
I get it!
I promised Kai I'd look the other way no matter what he did~
Ahh... Well...
Even YOU kept it a secret from me...
At the end of the day, your hand is gonna get cured, Sousuke!!
Oh, but I am!
For some reason you sound happy.
Huh?

It must be the same for you, Sousuke!!
Just think about it! I've been waiting for this day for 25 years!!
I was so glad, so excited I couldn't even sleep!
After listening to the doctor's explanation last night, I felt so happy I could fly!
To give up.
Because I was trying my best...
I haven't given it a single thought ...
Don't be ridiculous ...
I'm sorry, Sousuke... To be honest,
You're right.
I'd never thought about it either until Kai told me about the deal.
Sousuke...

Until Kai let me in on his plan, I had never once considered how medical science had advanced. Just how thick was I?
It was a self-fulfilling prophecy, you know.

What are you talking about...? He's done nothing that needs my forgiveness.

So I wish you'd just forgive him already.
Kai really is a wonderful kid.

Is myself.
The one whom I can't forgive...

Pat
Sousuke...
And I didn't know a thing...
All this time, Kai has been burdening himself with this...

Everything he's done isn't just for your sake. He's doing it for himself.
How he feels about this?
Hasn't Kai told you...

That's what I hear, you know.

PHILHARMONIC HALL

.....

GALA CONCERT, DAY 2

GALA CONCERT
Thank goodness.
Ah!
Ajino-sensei!
Looks like I worried over nothing.
I haven't seen him ever since I went on stage
I thought he wouldn't be coming today.
Well.. he's here, isn't he.
What's next...?
Ichinose left the party in such a hurry last night...
I thought something had happened to Sensei...

Next is Ichinose's Concerto No. 1!

Today's highlight!
Ichinoseeeee
Ichinoseeeee

Kai.

"Just how long have you been thinking about this?"
Kai.
"To tell the truth..."
Huh?
Ever since we went to Grandpa Jean's recital.

Your fingers... were playing the piano.
You probably didn't even realize you were doing it...
But I thought those dancing fingers...
Were more than enough proof that you want to go on stage again.
Kai...

I couldn't sleep at all last night.
I felt so miserable, so furious...
I can't forgive myself...
Kai picked up on my desire...
And concerned himself over it...
But in truth, I might just be deluding myself.
I thought I had already given up all hope...
Since I was the only one who could do it...
I had meant to protect Kai...
All this time,

Never had it occurred to me...
That I have only ever been a heavy burden that he has taken on himself to shoulder...
And I didn't notice a thing...
Even during such a crucial period for him...
Why didn't that silly boy say anything?!

"Just tell me one thing"
Kai...
Why is my revival instrumental...
To your career as a pianist?
Why...
Because I know for certain that I absolutely need you there...
That's...

You don't have to be my teacher.
It's okay if you leave!
Yeah, I know that.
You're already out of my hands. It's time you moved onto your next destina...
Kai...
You're already free, Ajino!
"So..."
"I've decided."

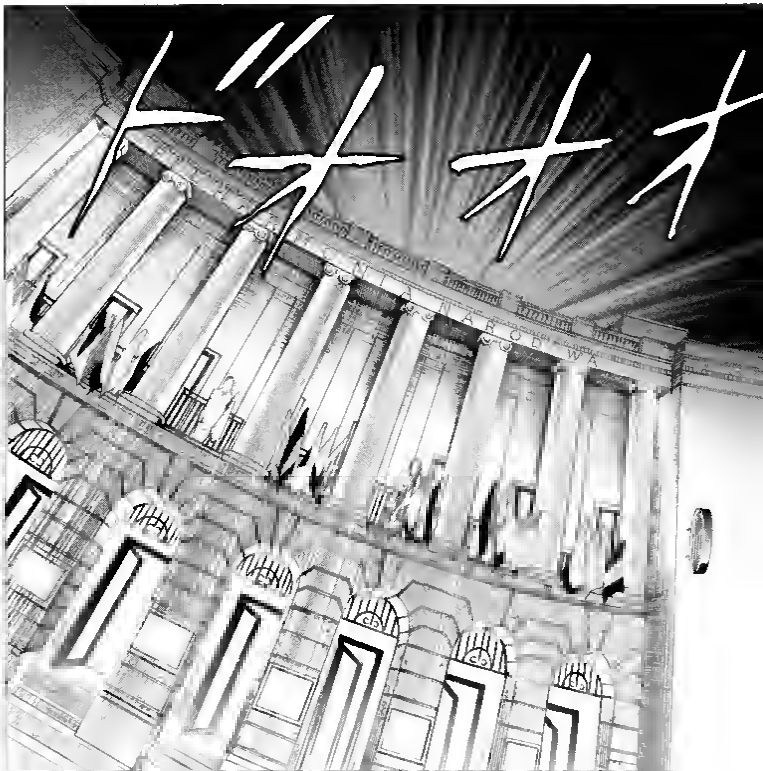
You're not my teacher, Ajino...
But my rival for life!
What is the problem?
The starting point of my piano playing...
Is you!
Piff
And here I was wondering what you were going to say...

Wonderful playing have I always been...
Just whose...
Listen-ing to...
Looking up to...?
The being whom I want to surpass...
Is you, Ajino!
Kai...
"I intend to make that my goal in life!"
"I want to outdo your incredible performance in that record-ing."

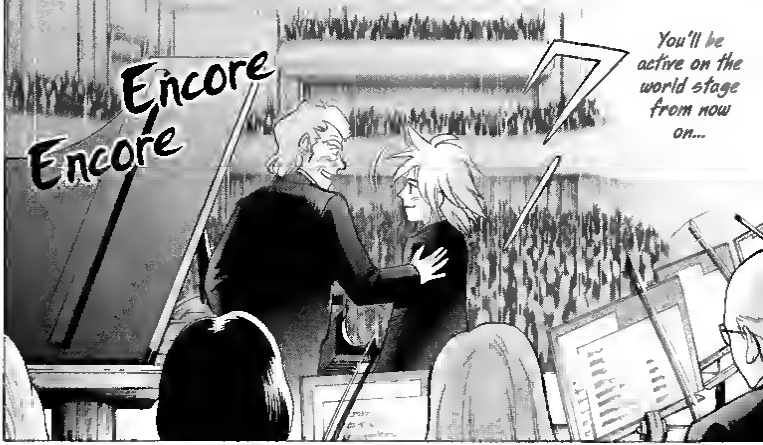
It suddenly occurred to me:
But when I saw that it was actually possible to cure your hand...
What if your music had a future...
No... I'm sure it does!

That future will surely...!
If you can make a cameback...

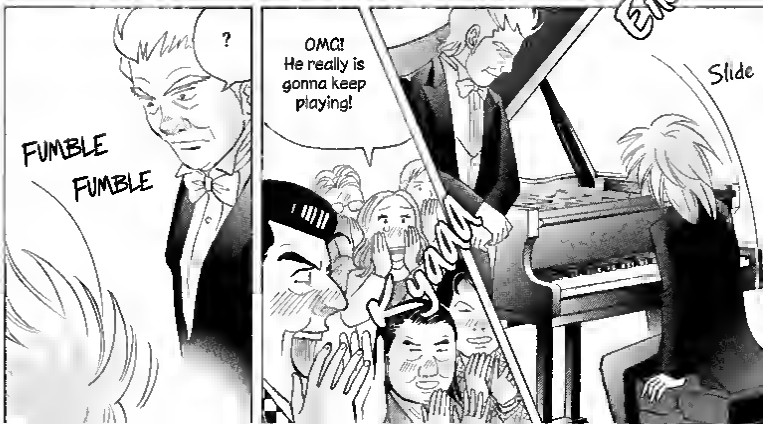
"That's why I "
That's why...
That's why I want to hear it!


Your music, no matter what!!
I want to hear
ドオオオ

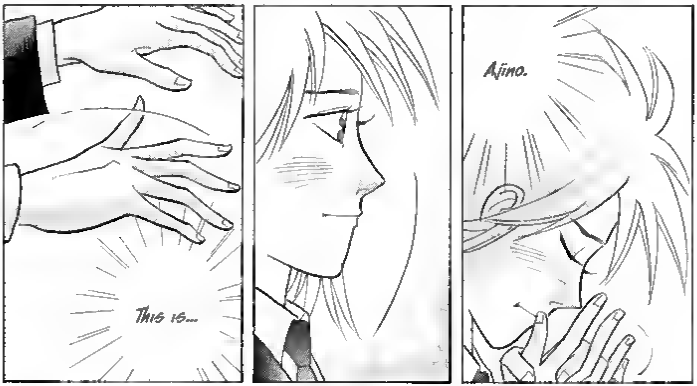
Kai.
TLAMOS
You're the champion of this prestigious competition.
Along with these talented rivals...
KAI!! ENCORE!!


Encore
Encore
You'll be active on the world stage from now on...

That would be utterly inexcusable!!
As if I could let you keep dealing with my problems!!


Encore
Slide
OMG! He really is gonna keep playing!
FUMBLE FUMBLE
?

?
Kai?


This is...
Ajino.

The starting point of my piano playing.

K...
Kai...
That's...
Y...You're kidding!
Oh? I think I know this song.
It's his own arrangement, isn't it?
!
Haha.
While being accompanied by the orchestra is...
That Kai is playing so smugly...
The encore piece...

"Little Brown Bottle".

I first arranged back when I was teaching at the elementary school...
This is the song...

It's also the song that Kai played in the forest...
The first time I listened to his music.
Just so I could be near my piano in the forest...
But it still felt like I was teaching all alone.
Just now, you made a mistake.
On the second repeat of 'Wa-ha-ha'... On the last 'ha ...
And...
Can we play the piano together?

Sousuke!
It isn't only in Japan...
"A boy becomes a man when he surpasses his father."
Where they say...
GALA CONCERT
You are the gigantic wall that Kai must surmount no matter what.
Rivals for Life END

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by ISSHIKI Makoto
一色まこと

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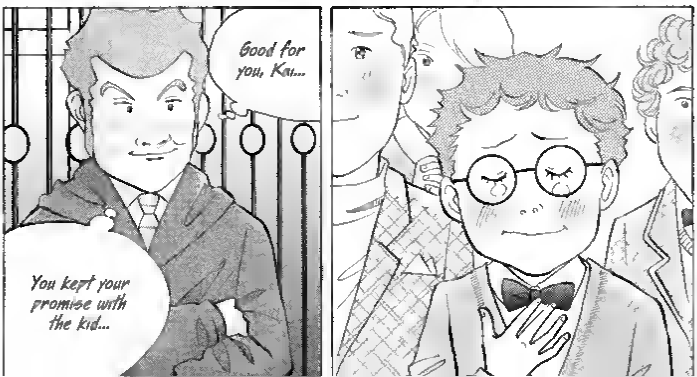
Piano no Mori

ピアノの森

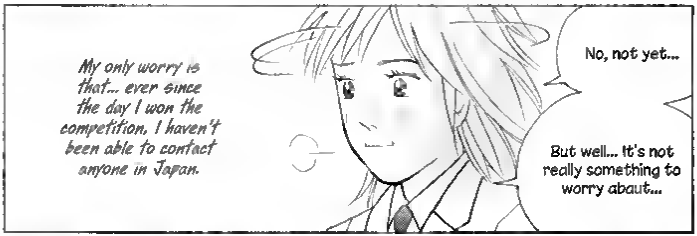
Chapter 238 I'm Back

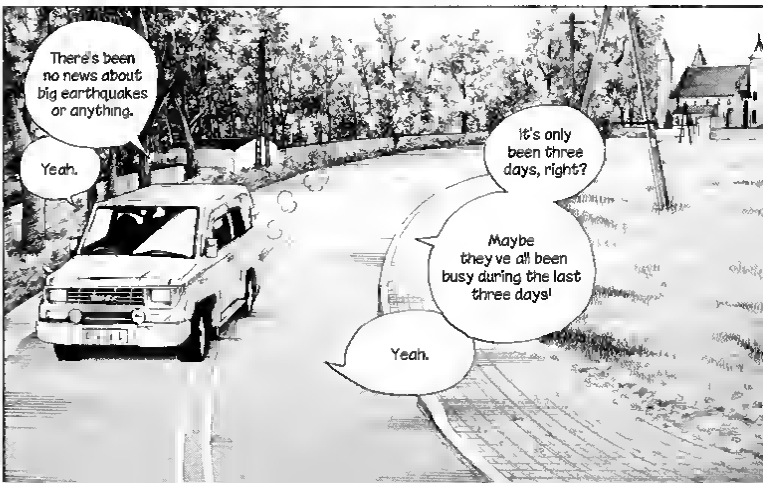
※ THE CHURCH WHERE CHOPIN WAS BAPTIZED



There was a time when I was dying to go back to Japan...
That's right...
Unbearably sad.
Thank you, Kai! You're the best!
Just the thought of going back...
But now...
...so...

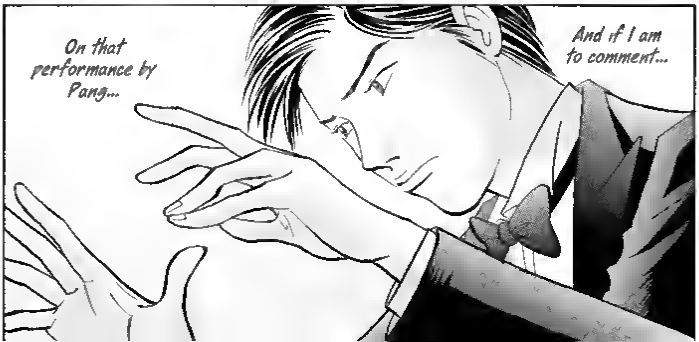
Yeah! Managed it somehow.
And have the folks back at home been in touch?
You're finally going back to Japan tomorrow, eh?
Have you finished packing?


My only worry is that... ever since the day I won the competition, I haven't been able to contact anyone in Japan.
No, not yet...
But well... It's not really something to worry about...


There's been no news about big earthquakes or anything.
Yeah.
It's only been three days, right?
Maybe they've all been busy during the last three days!
Yeah.

The final day of the Gala Concert...
Good luck with your final performance!
I'm off, Kai! See ya later!
Thanks, Wojew!
If there was a highlight for today...

It'd have to be Wei Pang's Concerto No. 2.


On that performance by Pang...
And if I am to comment...

That gave a perfect conclusion to the Chopin Competition!
I'd say it was a moving one...
ヒオオオ
Have you ever listened to such a fantastic No. 2?
No, I haven't! What a shock!
Ever since what happened, I haven't talked much with Ajino-sensei.

I was really unnerved...
By the strange expression he had at that time...
Ajino had already gone back to his usual self.
Last night... after the Gala Concert...
I hurt Sensei.
So I want to leave things the way they are now.
On something he didn't want anyone to touch.
Out of my own self-indulgence, I trespassed...

That's why I wish... the day would never come..
That's why...

It's probably for the best to leave the whole thing in the past.
For Ajino-sensei to bring up the subject again.

In that case, will I be dragged into the whole fuss?
At this rate, it's gonna be really big back in Japan, right?
No... you don't have to worry about that.

That's what it means to be a "champion", Kousei-kun.
They're actually holding a champion's press conference exclusively for them...

パシャ
パシャ
My, my, my. Just look at this crowd of Japanese journalists...

STO lat
STO lat
And this is my final night in Warsaw.

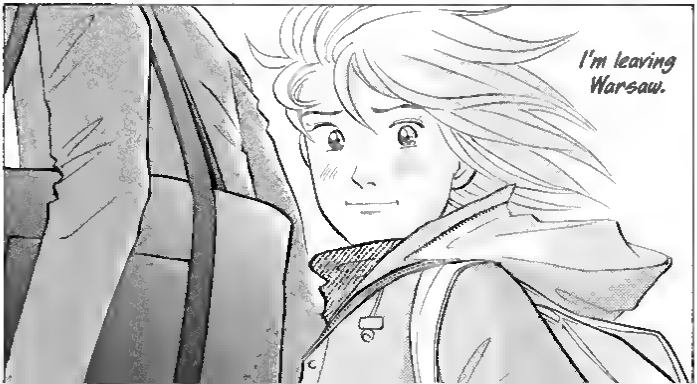
Still no luck?
The next morning, I go and pay my last homage to Chopin.

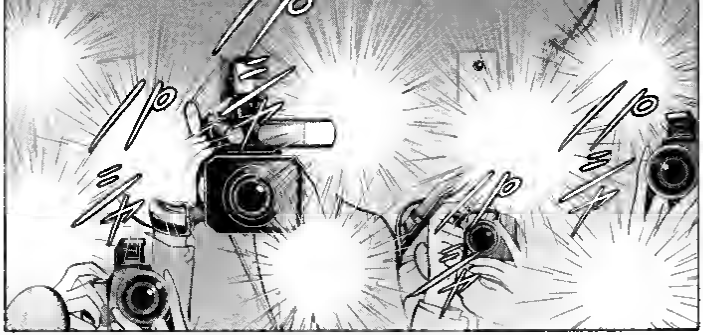
I wonder what's going on...?
Well... Don't worry too much about it.
Yes, I suppose.
No... But it's only been four days. It happens.

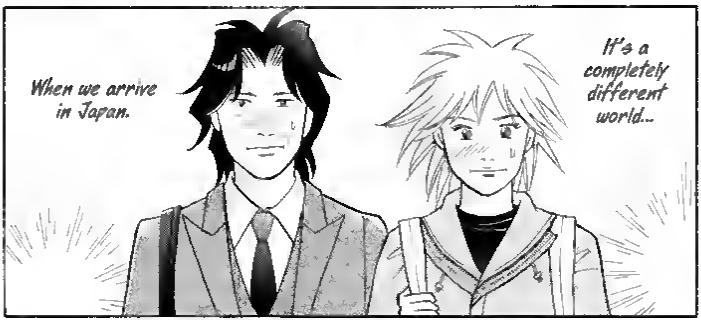
Wo3ew! You shouldn't have come if you're just gonna spend the whole time crying!
Ahaha
Kai... I'll come after you all the way to Japan!
Jean! Wait for me!

Shake Shake

After staying for two months...
Wow! It's so small!
We'll change planes soon.
And thus,
LOT
1503


I'm leaving Warsaw.

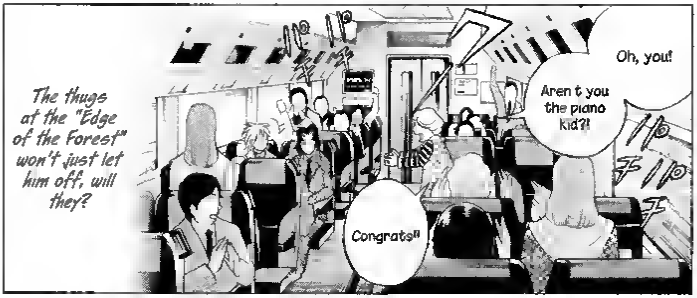


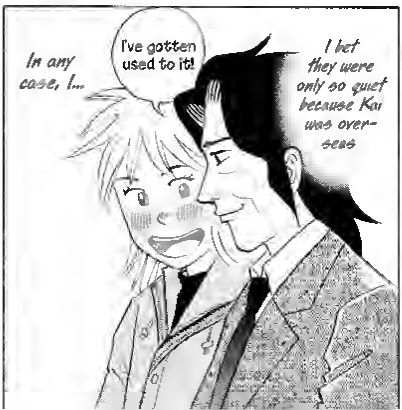

When we arrive in Japan.
It's a completely different world...

Thank you very much.
KAI-KUUUUUN CONGRATS !!
ICHINOSE-SAAAAN!!
CON-GRATULA-TIONS!!
WELCOME BACK!!

And no one can lay a hand on you anymore.
If you stand out, you stand out.
But it's not a bad thing to be in the limelight.
I know, right? That gave me quite a shock.
It's like I'm a star.
Roll
Roll
There are so many people here I can't get close to Ichinose-kun at all!
Miyanen-san at the studio!
Let's have Ichinose-kun pay a visit to our studio next time!
Looks like we can't even catch a glimpse of him!
It'll pass... But it does take some getting used to, doesn't it?
Well...
I wonder if I'll ever get used to this.

If he stands out, people can't lay a hand on him, huh...
Hmm? Isn't that...
But then, the opposite is just as likely.


The thugs at the "Edge of the Forest" won't just let him off, will they?
Oh, you!
Aren't you the piano kid?!
Congrats!!


In any case, I...
I've gotten used to it!
I bet they were only so quiet because Kai was overseas

CLAP
CLAP
Tha-
Thank you very much.

My own problem can wait.
Must do everything within my power to protect Kai.

WOO-HOO! ♡

AHAH
We're here, Kai.

I've only been away for two months, but it felt like ten years.
Haha.
Wow!! I've missed this place!!

But it's all dark in there.
Vroom...
It's only 7 o'clock.
She'll probably be back soon.
So Sae-chan really hasn't come back.
She wasn't taking my calls either...
Sure. I'll call you later.
We have to talk about what happens next, anyway.
You've got to come back after you sort out your stuff.
Aoino!

Party Club
Just go in and have a good rest for today. You had a long trip.
Haha.
Yeah...
Though I wish I knew.
Vrooom...
He'll be back.
Guess it's all good.
Click
Huh?
Ka-chak
But I still can't get in touch with Sae-chan.

What's with this strange atmosphere... It feels really oppressive...
U...h
...
RUSTLE
Huh?!
!!!

WHOA-
AAAA-
AAAA
KILL THE LIGHTS!
SHUT IT!
.....

What...
KEEP OUT
KEEP OUT
What on earth...

KEEP OUT
Hey! Hold it there!
You look like a respectable guy! You'd better not stick your nose in there!
There was a huge raid here three or four days ago.
Don't do that!
Huh?

It's true! That's what the police said!
They insisted the one who killed their boss was hiding here!
The Chinese Mafia came barging in and tore the whole place apart!
A raid, you said?
What?
He's from that place, you know? The whole bunch from the Edge of the Forest were in the footage, faces and everything...
They said the guy they were after was caught on tape in a video that got uploaded onto YouTube...
KEEP OU
The whole branch came in a bus!
Even the northern police division came to clean things up in the end!
That was no small commotion, after all...
They all fled!
That's right.
Yammer Yammer
Th-Then where is everyone in this neighborhood?

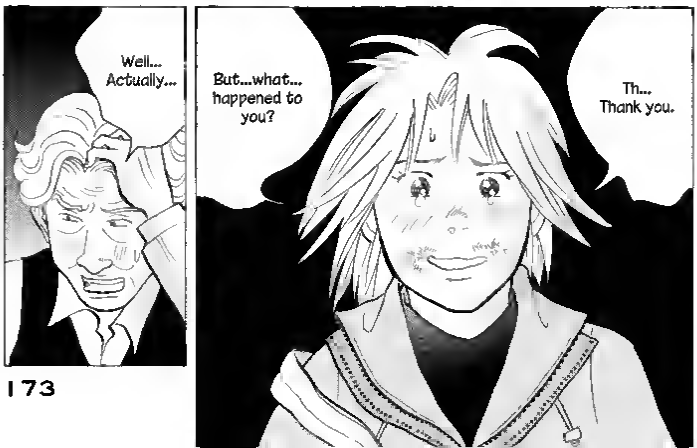
You're right!
Well... If that's the end of the Edge of the Forest, I don't care!
There was this huge gunshot and they said someone died...
I know, right?
But the strange thing is... it never made the news!
Rei...

Reiko-san!

Mmmhng
Party Club

Kai! It's us!
Don't make any loud noise.

Congrats, Kai!
Congrats!
Congrats!
Well done, Kai!

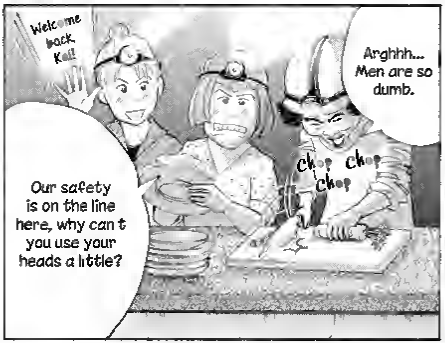

Well... Actually...
But...what... happened to you?
Th... Thank you.

But a vid of the beating somehow made its way to the net.
The rough guys took care of 'em...
About a week ago, some outsiders came to the Edge with cameramen...
So a few days later, a bunch of scary dudes from all sorts of countries pretended to be guests and made their way in, then just swept the whole place.
Thanks to that, all the bad guys lyin' low at the Edge got caught on tape...
北警察署
Well, they were released the next day... But the word is that the scary bunch is still holed up at the Edge...
We bolted in time so we're fine, but in the end, the cops in the northern branch caught wind of it and swarmed the place...
I spent a night in jail, ya know!

Ka-chak
Where's Sae-chan?
It's not safe there, so we asked Sae-chan to hide us all here.
Ah!
Meat.
Bird.
WAAAAH KAAA!!
Sae-chan!!

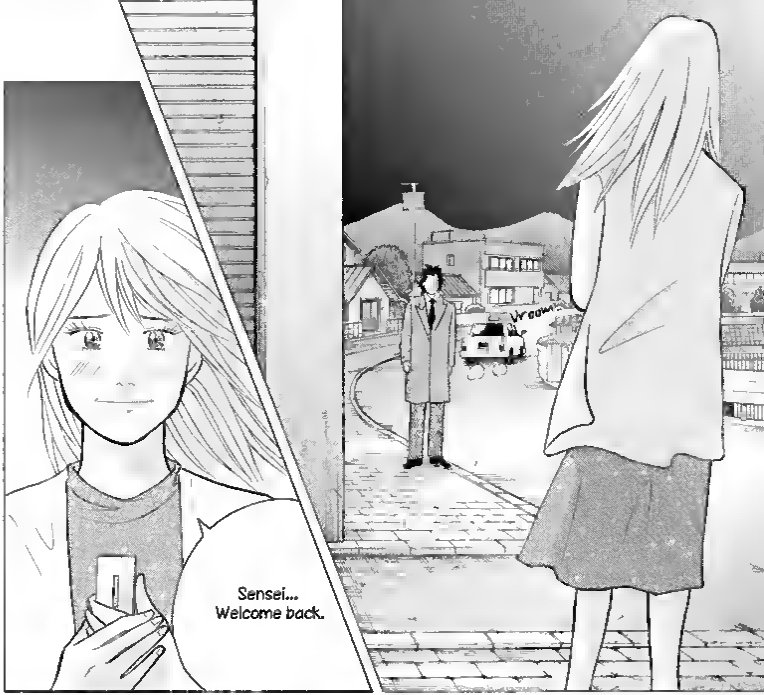
DAMMIT! KEEP YOUR VOICES DOWN!
GET ON WITH THE PEELING!

Don't lump all men together.
Ah, Ben-chan is an exception.


Welcome back, Kai!
Our safety is on the line here, why can't you use your heads a little?
Arghhh... Men are so dumb.
Chop Chop Chop

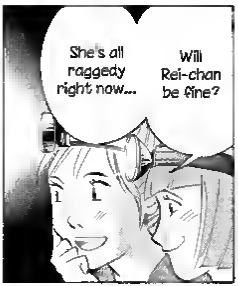
Congrats, Kai! Welcome back!
Thank you, Sae-chan. It's great to be back.

Sorry for getting you caught up in this, Sae-chan...
It's fine! Communal life is fun!
Thank god you're okay.
I've been so worried you weren't answering my calls.
Yeah, I'm sorry! I'm such an idiot, I lost my phone.
Is Rei-chan okay?
Of course she is.
That's not a spotlight.
But we almost didn't make it.
We were out together buying dinner...
And picking up everyone's cell phones at the police station while we were out.
VR-OOOM...
At that moment, Rei-chan's phone rang...

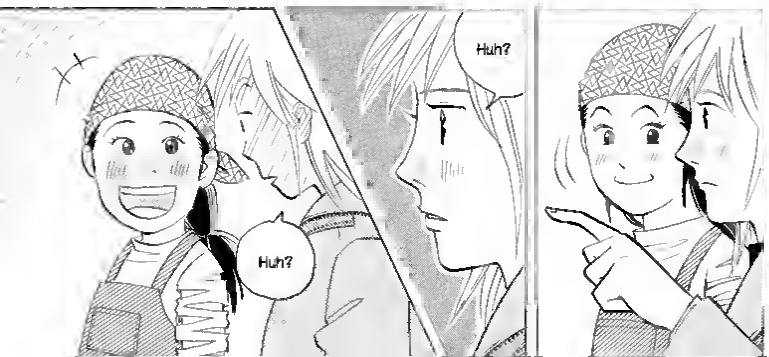

Sensei...
Welcome back.
Vroom...

Quit yankin'!
I wanna see too!
I'm glad...
To see you.

Huhhh? What the heck?
Well, well.
Ben-chan probably shouldn't see this.


Will Rei-chan be fine?
She's all raggedy right now...

Huh? What are you doing?
I'm not sure what you're getting at...
It's fine even if you don't know.
The world is full of stuff we don't know.


Huh?
Huh?

Thank goodness...
You made it back safely.
You too.
I'm so glad that you're safe.

Oh... This.
This piano key really is the best talisman.
If anything had happened to you...
I would spend the rest of my life blaming myself for taking it from you.
Fufu...
Haha...

But really. Thank goodness.
Sorry to have worried you.

What's happnin?
I can't hear a thing...
Hey, Rei-chan's chucklin'!
Stop pullin at me!
Imma kill ya!
I'm Back END

What we need now...
is a ship name.
Is the ship sailin'?
Looks like it...
Stop pushin'!
I'm gettin' onboard!
I'm gettin' on first!

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by ISSHIKI Makoto
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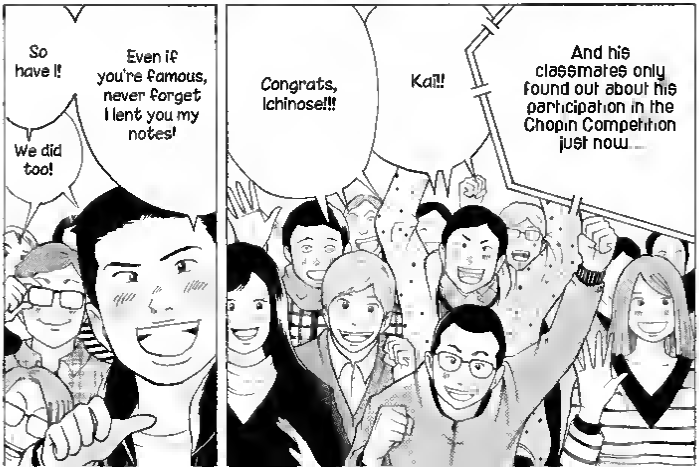
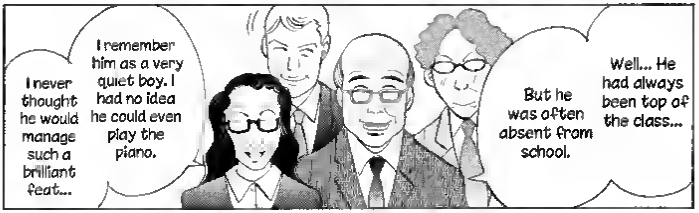
Piano no Mori

ピアノの森

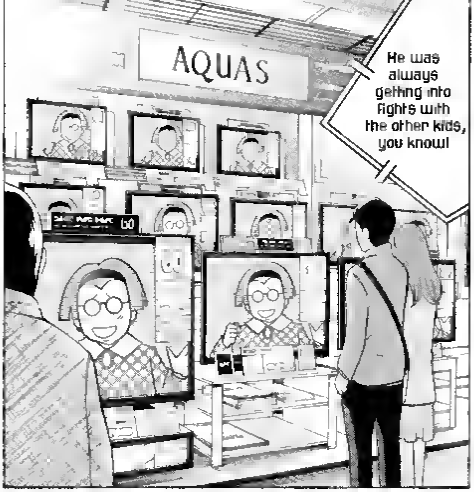
CELEBRATING CHOPIN COMPETITION WINNER
ICHINOSE KAI
Here we are...at Ichinose-kun's high school...
WOOO
CELEBRATING CHOPIN COMPETITION WINNER
ICHINOSE KAI
Fukorozashi Academy
It's a reputable school in this area, but doesn't seem to offer Music as a subject!


And his classmates only found out about his participation in the Chopin Competition just now...
Kai!!
Congrats, Ichinose!!!
Even if you're famous, never forget I lent you my notes!
So have I!
We did too!

We have his homeroom teachers,
Principal, and Vice-Principal here to tell us something about him.
STUDIO ALTA
We're here at the middle school that Ichinose-kun graduated from.

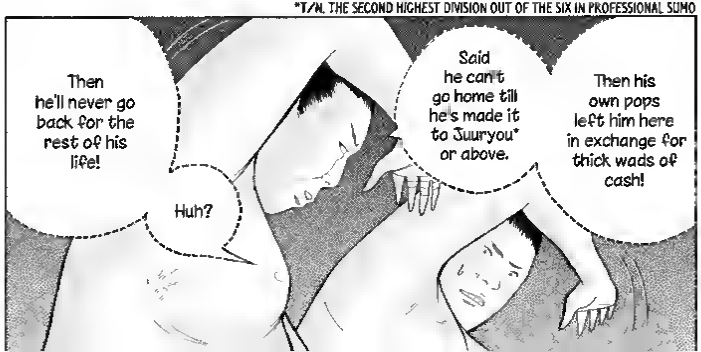

I never thought he would manage such a brilliant feat...
I remember him as a very quiet boy. I had no idea he could even play the piano.
But he was often absent from school.
Well... He had always been top of the class...

We've come to Ichinose-kun's elementary school!!


AQUAS
He was always getting into fights with the other kids, you know!
No, I didn't know Ichinose-kun took piano lessons

Huh? He got into fights?!
Yamanote Stable
That's right! Every single day! Even with boys twice his size

*T/N. THE SECOND HIGHEST DIVISION OUT OF THE SIX IN PROFESSIONAL SUMO


Then he'll never go back for the rest of his life!
Huh?
Said he can't go home till he's made it to Juuryou* or above.
Then his own pops left him here in exchange for thick wads of cash!

Huh?
Ah.

Well then... Guess it's time I took this seriously too!

Chapter 239 Surgery

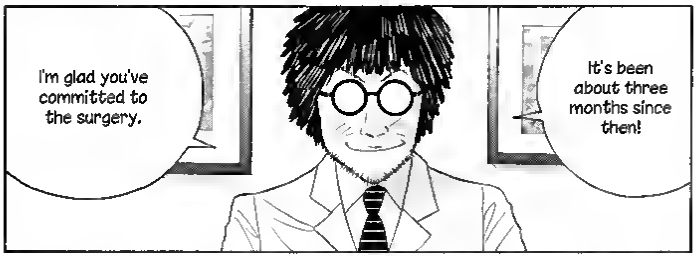
ガガガ
ガガガ

Looks like they're also gonna conserve the forest and turn it into a natural park!
There's also gonna be a huge supermarket!
And a beauty salon, too!

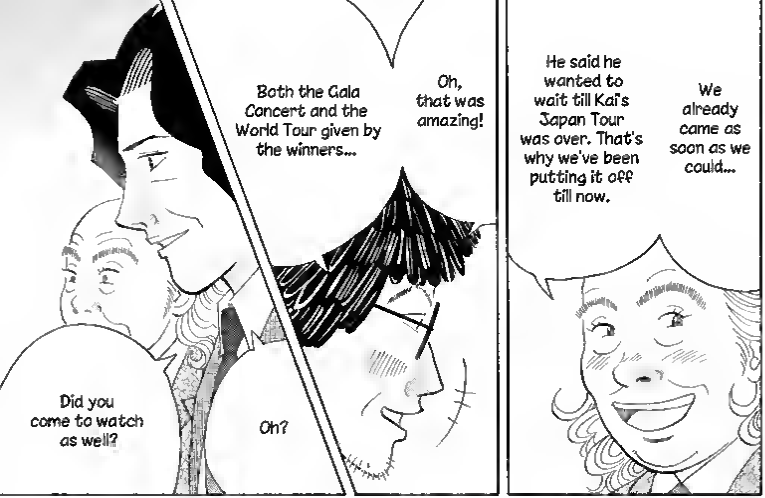
Sighhhh. I never knew the Edge of the Forest was so huge.
It'd be great if they can build a new town in its place. This is exciting, isn't it?

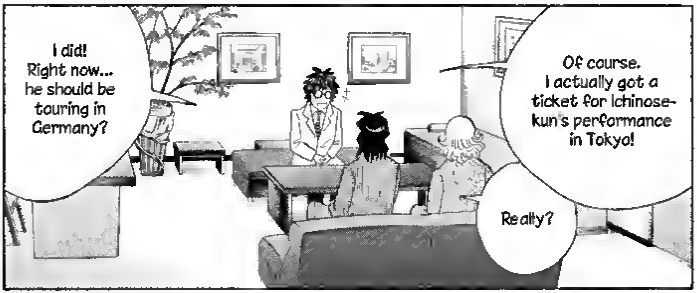
Don't push yourself too hard, Oi Pon!
Ahaha...
Arghhh... I've been workin' since mornin'! I'm starvin'!!
Rattle Rattle
Imma get a house here after they're done, I'm tellin' ya!
Oh, shut it.
What the hell, who cares about that, lame-o!
But Sae-chan said we'd be havin' dinner early tonight!
I have Ajino Sousuku-sensei to vouch for me.
Tee-hee... I'll get through, no problem.
You need completely watertight identification. You got that?
Jeez. Can you even pass the vettin' process?

TOKYO YAMATE MEDICAL SCHOOL HOSPITAL


I'm glad you've committed to the surgery.
It's been about three months since then!

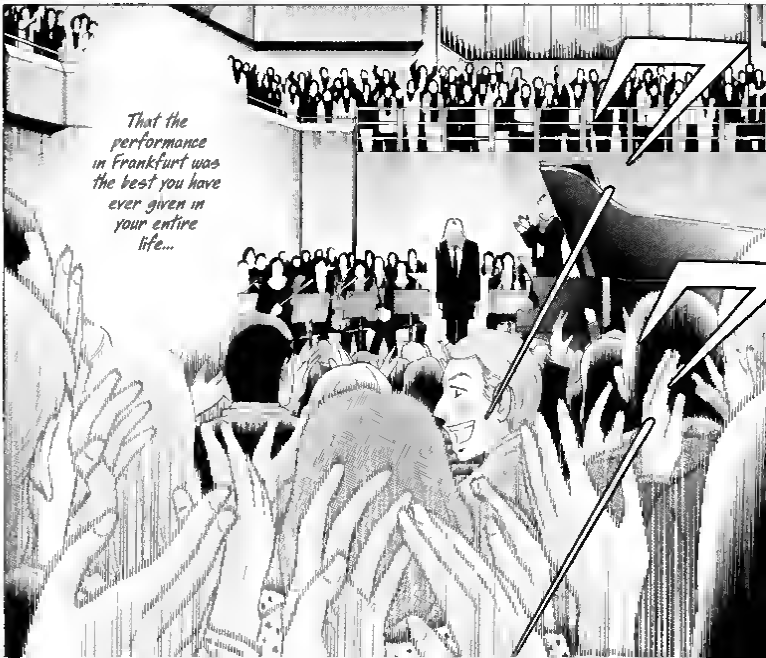
I've been waiting for this day.
Then I'll be in your care.


Did you come to watch as well?
Oh?
Both the Gala Concert and the World Tour given by the winners...
Oh, that was amazing!
He said he wanted to wait till Kai's Japan Tour was over. That's why we've been putting it off till now.
We already came as soon as we could...


I did! Right now... he should be touring in Germany?
Of course. I actually got a ticket for Ichinose-kun's performance in Tokyo!
Really?

Kai!
I'm now here at the hospital with Jean.
That's right! He's in Frankfurt.

You told me this morning on the phone...


That the performance in Frankfurt was the best you have ever given in your entire life...

The sheer excitement you showed when you told me about it...
It must have been a truly wonderful performance...
Knock
Knock
How I want to fly to Germany this very instant!
No way, you must be kidding!

Sorry to keep you waiting!
CLICK

I still can't bring myself to like Dr. Nakao...
My, my! It's already been three months, hasn't it?

I can't say I trust him either.

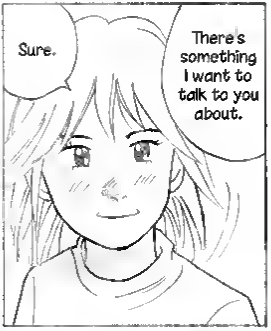
I doubt I'd even get a proper check-up.
I only came because Jean forced me into it. If it weren't for him...

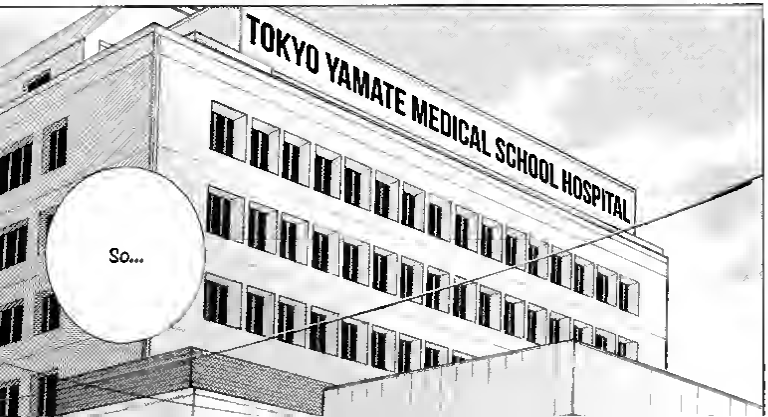
.....
.....
Glug
Glug
Glug
Glug
Glug
Glug
Glug

WHOAAA
AAAAAH!
SLAM
Hold on, are you sure you'll be all right, Aubrey?
Isn't that way too much even for a local?
Dammit!! The beer in Germany is SO GOOD I could cry!!!
N...No thanks.
I'm nat legal yet.
I can't have any alcohol...
Hey! You two cuties over there!
How about a beer?
Isn't Poland supposed to be a country full of alcoholics?
Poles
Aubrey! Aubrey!
Excuse me, some sparkling water for her, please!!
Huhhh? You can't drink, and you call yourself a Pole?

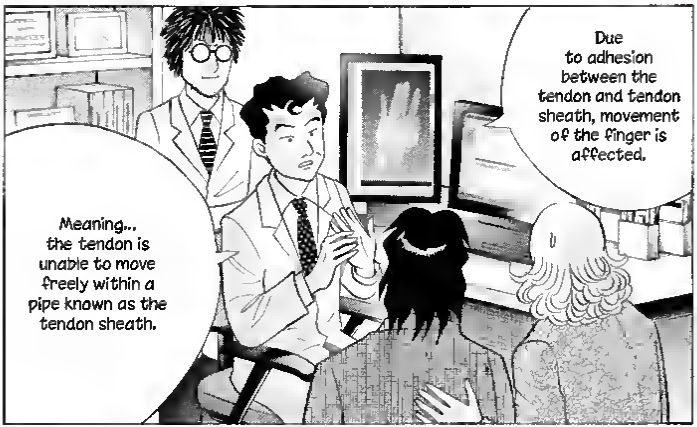
Let's go for a walk after this.
?
Hey Ichinose, got a minute?

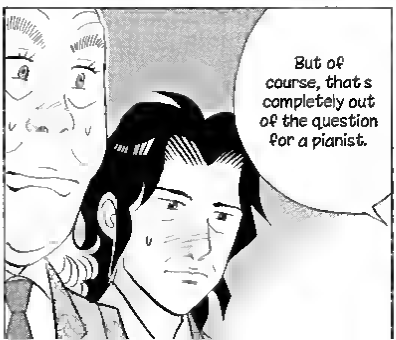
Ahaha...
Aubrey, I'm up for it.
Yayyyy!! Honey ♡


Sure.
There's something I want to talk to you about.


TOKYO YAMATE MEDICAL SCHOOL HOSPITAL
So...

Suffers from Crush Syndrome, having been trapped by the car frame in the accident.
To put it simply, Aijno-san's left hand...


Due to adhesion between the tendon and tendon sheath, movement of the finger is affected.
Meaning... the tendon is unable to move freely within a pipe known as the tendon sheath.


But of course, that's completely out of the question for a pianist.

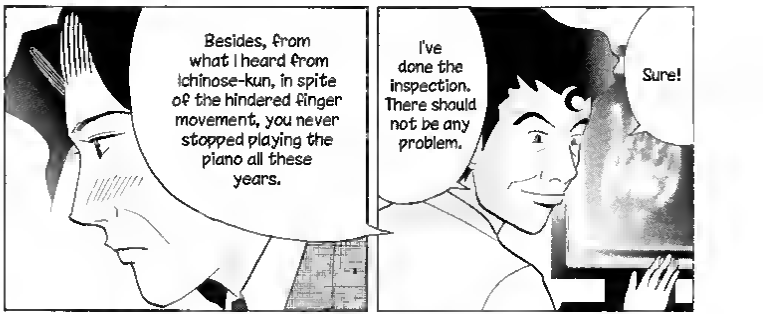
Several zigzag openings would have to be made on the palm...
Back then, to cure this condition...

The scars left by the open wounds would render delicate movement impossible.
And even if the adhesion were fixed after the surgery,
OPENINGS NEED TO BE ZIGZAGGED IN PALM SURGERIES

Back then, no matter how many times they talked to me about this, my mind would simply shut down...so it was all a blur to me.
This almost feels like I'm having the condition of my own hand explained to me for the first time.

With my endoscopic tools, it is possible to cure your hand, and the wounds will only be two millimeters across!
That's right!
That's...
Can now be cured.
What used to be incurable even with surgery...

Having been delayed for 25 years?
Still... will the surgery work...
Such small wounds require no stitches and the scars will eventually fade away.
No.
Nashimoto-kun, will the two-millimeter wounds cause any issues?


Besides, from what I heard from Ichinose-kun, in spite of the hindered finger movement, you never stopped playing the piano all these years.
I've done the inspection. There should not be any problem.
Sure!

Sousuke...
I'm sure your post-surgical rehab will go smoothly.
Thanks to that, your hand has retained its muscular strength, and the joints haven't gone stiff.

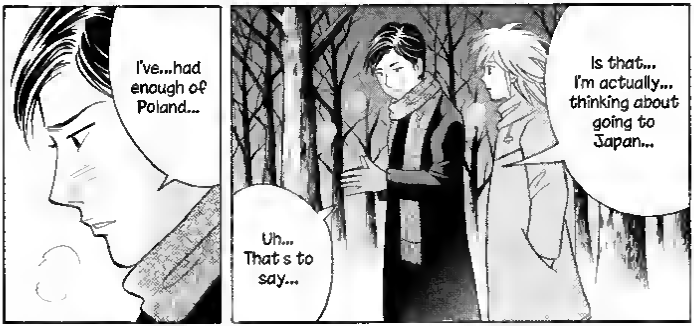
Adding in the facility fees... anesthetist fees... That'll bring it up to around 400k.
So in Ajino-san's case, we'll have to operate on his middle finger, ring finger and pinky... That's three fingers, so it'll be around 300k.
Hmm... One finger costs around 100k...
But how about the fees...?

Huh?
But... uh... I heard even the winner's prize money... isn't enough to cover this sum...

This... This doctor... I don't even know what to say...

Ahhh!
There it comes, there it comes! A line right out of a horror story!

What I want to say...
Or rather, to discuss with you...


I've...had enough of Poland...
Uh... That's to say...
Is that... I'm actually... thinking about going to Japan...

What do you think...if I was to study under him?
Ajino-sensei is there... So...
You mean... you're gonna live there? In Japan...?!

I've worried about...how I should make my approach...so I'm kind of at a loss...
This is the first time...
Hey...
What is it?
What do you think?
Why?
I think Aijino-sensei has no intention of teaching anyone...
But I'm against it!
I...I'm sorry!

What happened?
You got the boot?
Huh?
That's not it... Anyway, he's no longer my teacher.
Even I've stopped studying under him.
Ah! Excuse me.
Ring...
I can take up the vacancy, right?
Then isn't it perfect?!
Ring...
Aüino-sensei's operation is scheduled ta take place tomorrow morning!
Ahh... Ichinose-kun?

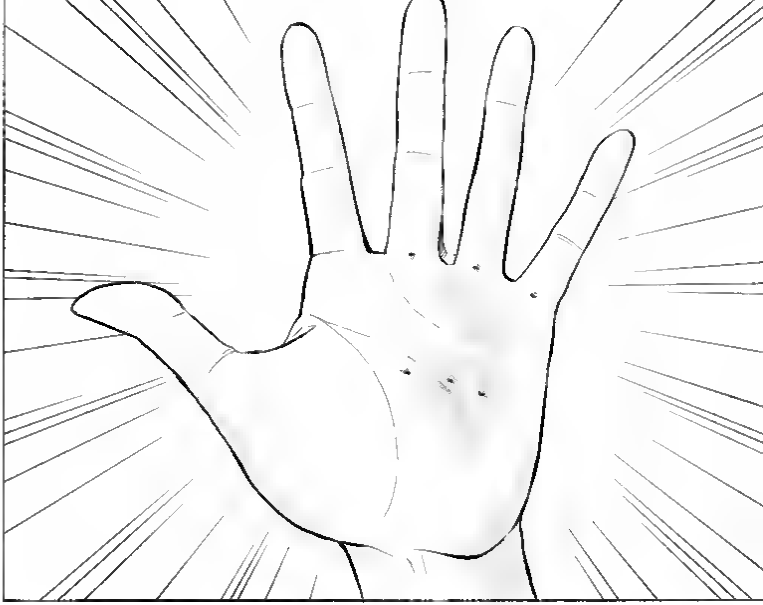
Haha... The sooner the better!
Clink Clink
Huh? You'll be back in a week?
Dr. Nakao has been stuck here for a whole month just for this, you know!
What?!
Isn't that too soon? Didn't he just finish the check-up today?
Call you later!
Ah... It's tomorrow.
Perfect! Ah, I'd better go get some bandages
S-Speaking of which, how's your father's condition, Pang-son?
I see. You must be worried.
Uh... Yeah... someone in my family ...
Is someone having an operation?

He's just lying there all wrapped up in bandages, with lots of tubes sticking out of him,
And he doesn't seem to have come to yet,
But he's spending a fortune just being hospitalized.
Well... That guy somehow isn't dead...
Eh?
He's got some amazing spunk.
Anyway, going back to our original topic...
What scares me the most...
Is how he might become some cyborg old man, what with all that metal and machines embedded in his body!
He'd beat me to death...
I'm sorry, Pang-san!
I really can't help with that!
Why? That's stingy of you.
Do you know how long it took to bring myself to tell you that?!

Th...That's not it...
Then why?!
Just spit it out if something's bothering you!
Or are you just jealous?
Tomorrow...
Tomorrow, Ajino will have his operation!!
Ajino...
Ajino!!

Staaaaaare
We're counting on you, Shibuya-kun! Record this so Kai can see!
Got it!
Staaaaaare
Ajino!!
Roger!
You heard that?
Better have the monitor in the frame too!
If you want to record this,
Ah... Please cover your hair!
Faint
Huhhh ?!!

Beep!
From Ajino himself.
AJINO
The surgery went smoothly and is now over. Hope to see you soon.
Beep
Beep
Beep
Beep!
ZZZZ
The next day, at about 1pm in Japan, which is 5am in Germany...
I got an uncharacteristically long message...
Though it felt much longer...
ガラガラガラガラ
A week later...
Ajino!



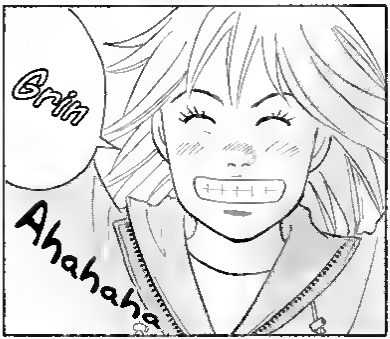
Let me see you move it!
Look!
It's only been a week!
Would you believe it?
I did say I wouldn't believe it until I'd seen it with my own eyes...

How does it feel?
This doesn't seem real...
Hmm.
But I can move it with no problem at all, Kai.

Thank god!
Isn't that great, Kai?!
Kai!

OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD, YES!!!
THAT'S GREAT, AJINO!!!

It's true that the operation was a success...
H... Hold your horses!
But being your rival... I still have to think about it.
Ahahaha...
AMAZING! AMAZING!! AMAZING!
NOW AJINO IS PEERLESS!


Grin
Ahahaha

Do remember I've been handicapped for 25 years.
Who cares, Kai?! No need to cut him any slack!

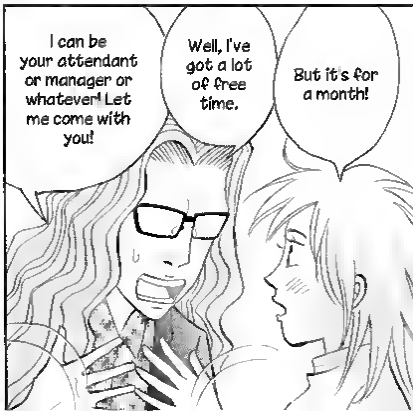
Which is also when I'll begin my US tour.
Ajino will start his rehab in a week's time.

Sae-chan, I can't eat all that...
You've still got lots of mouths to feed.
The thought of leaving Japan for almost a whole month... makes me a bit lonely...
Lub

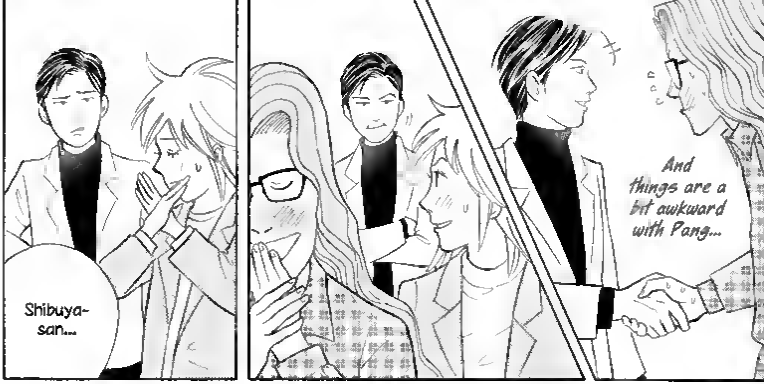
I hear they're paying for two people for the America Tour!

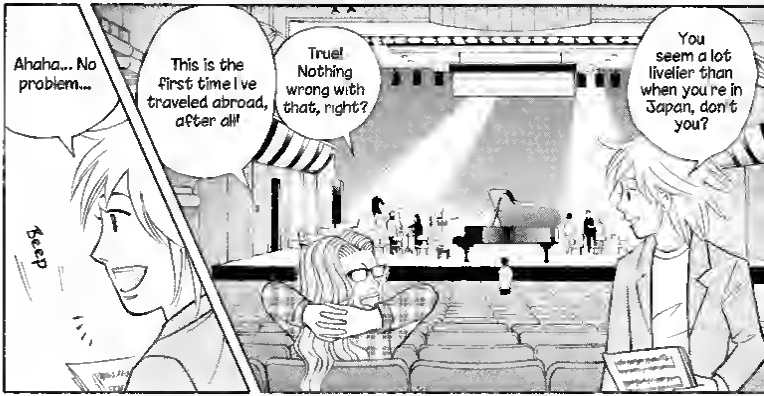
That's right!
Shibuya-san?
Then I guess I'll have to come, yeah?

But this time, I'll look forward to coming home!
How many times have I lent you a hand up till now?


I can be your attendant or manager or whatever! Let me come with you!
Well, I've got a lot of free time.
But it's for a month!

I might even get to hear Ajino play the piano!
If the rehab goes well...
Every-thing looks great!
Even though it'll be an exhausting trip 'cause we'll be performing in ten venues...
We're here in New York!
Chopin
The piano
Concert


Shibuya-san...
And things are a bit awkward with Pang...


Ahaha... No problem...
This is the first time I've traveled abroad, after all!
True! Nothing wrong with that, right?
You seem a lot livelier than when you're in Japan, don't you?
Beep

GRANDPA JEAN
Sousuke's rehab isn't working.
Ah! A message from Jean!

Surgery END

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Chapter 240

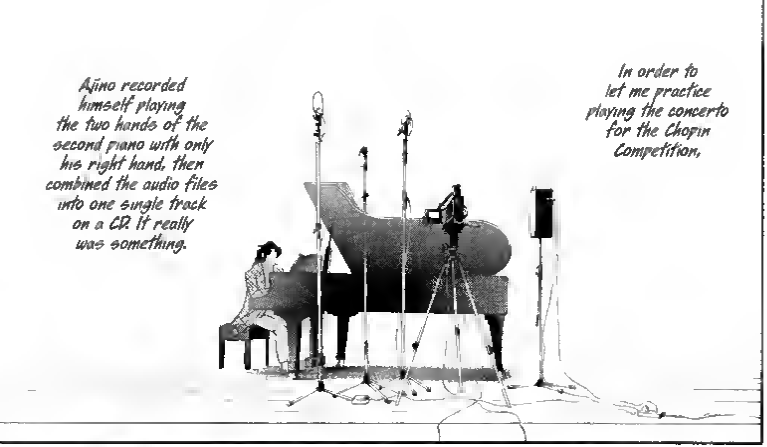
Rehabilitation

The rehabilitation isn't going well...?
Chopin
The piano
Concert
Wh-What do you mean?
Like his hand got worse or something?
Thank goodness.
No... sorry, sorry. His hand s fine!
Ther why did you send that?
It couldn't be any better.

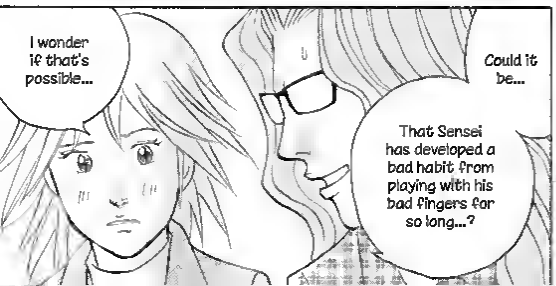
It's working as well as his right hand and gives him no trouble for everyday tasks,
But when it comes to playing the piano...
For some reason, he still plays the way he did before the surgery.

Well... he can only start playing for real a month after the surgery... That's what the doctor said...
He's only just begun so we're not too worried, but...

So? What did he say?
I'm just a bit concerned about the piece he's practicing...
Even though Jean tells him to play something else, it doesn't seem to make any difference.
Yeah.
I see. So Aáino-sensei started with the second piano*.
*A PIANO ARRANGEMENT OF THE ORCHESTRAL ACCOMPANIMENT OF A CONCERTO WHICH ENABLES ONE TO PRACTICE THE PIECE WIHTOUT AN ORCHESTRA.
So I kinda know how he feels.
Hmm.
But in the end, he never managed to record a version where he played with both hands...
Well... that's because he practiced that piece for almost a year.


Ajino recorded himself playing the two hands of the second piano with only his right hand, then combined the audio files into one single track on a CD. It really was something.
In order to let me practice playing the concerto for the Chopin Competition,

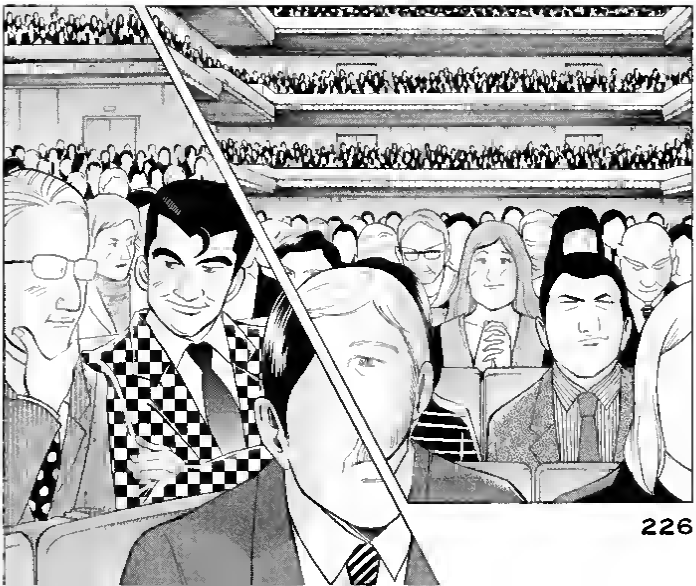
He ended up making 23 versions.
Even Ajino has a stubborn streak.
But then again, that song means a lot to him.


I wonder if that's possible...
Could it be...
That Sensei has developed a bad habit from playing with his bad fingers for so long...?

Even if I try to fix it, it's something that's been engrained in me since I was a kid...
Because look, the way I run is a little weird, right?
Course it is!
Hey...
Is something the matter with Aôino-sensei?
Eh?
Tell me, Ichinose.
Really! Right now nothing...
Seriously!
No, nothing really...
Ack... that's right Pang knows Japanese

It's your turn to rehearse!
Heyyyy~ Mr Pang!
Well done, Allegra.
We really can't tell Pang
Tsk.
The performances in New York have been a success from day one...

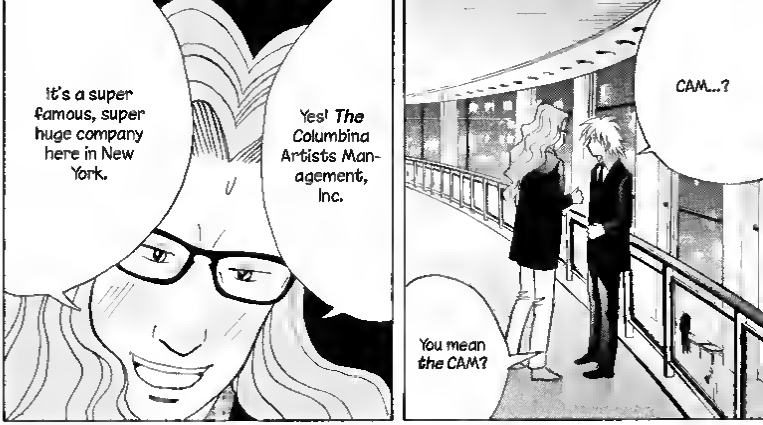
It was a full house.

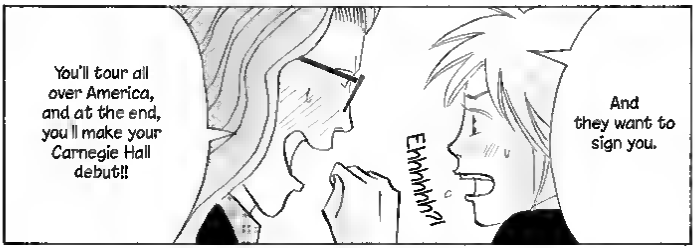


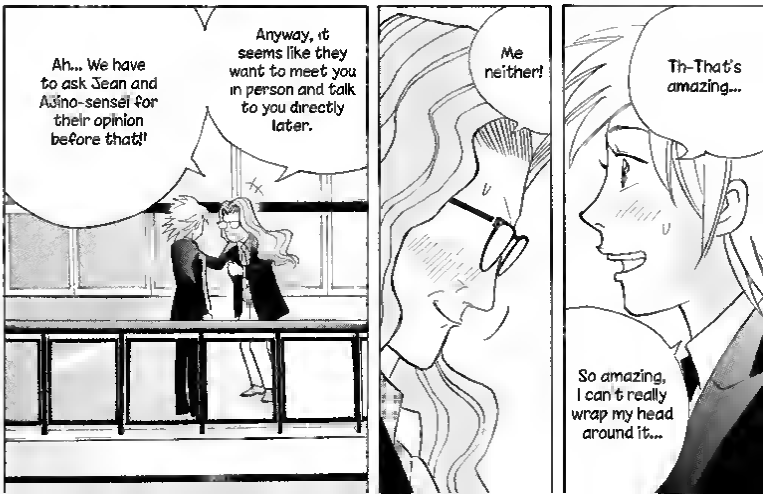
Is to give the best performance I can here!
The only thing I can do for Ajino right now...
I'll channel my strength to him!!
No matter where I am...
Just what you'd expect from Kai...!

Are you Mr. Shibuya?
Encore
Encore
YES
I-I'm so proud.
Ah...
Are you Kai Ichinose's manager, Mr. Shibuya?
Eh?

HERE IT IS !!!!
I don't think it's a bad deal...
Sh- Shibuya-san.
Whoa, he runs funny!
K-
KAAA!!
What's wrong?
Just come with me!


It's a super famous, super huge company here in New York.
Yes! The Columbina Artists Management, Inc.
CAM...?
You mean the CAM?


You'll tour all over America, and at the end, you'll make your Carnegie Hall debut!!
EHHHHHH?!
And they want to sign you.


Ah... We have to ask Jean and Ajino-sensei for their opinion before that!
Anyway, it seems like they want to meet you in person and talk to you directly later.
Me neither!
Th-That's amazing...
So amazing, I can't really wrap my head around it...

A total budget of o-one billion?!!
Whaaat ?!!
Haha... that's America for you.
They like things huge!
He'll have to see the contract first.
It's too soon to commit to anything.
He says it'll take half a year!
What do you think, Sousuke?
So he's gonna give recitals and concerts for four days straight, then make his Carnegie Hall debut to wrap things up?!
Yes.

Ben-chan, wake up.
There's something much better than a nap!
Wow
I wonder how much Kai will get out of this deal...
And how much will be left for me.
They're talking huge stuff!
And NY English is fast!

Yeah, I heard from Jean.
Does he understand how big this is?
He looks as if it had nothing to do with him.
...But this brat...
That's right!
Two of his legal advisors...
He said they'll come for the next performance in Philadelphia.
Well, it certainly is an amazing opportunity!
Haha ...
But Jean said, "you're young, so go for it!"
I was a bit worried... since it's gonna start right after the current tour,
Well, signing a bad contract is scary.
If you approach it carefully though, it could be quite a good experience for you.

Getting better, all thanks to you.
I never thought life could be so easy with two good hands.
More importantly, how's your hand?

Also... umm...
...I hope Rei-chan isn't getting in your way?

Though it seems that playing the piano will take a bit of rehab
Haha... just take your time.

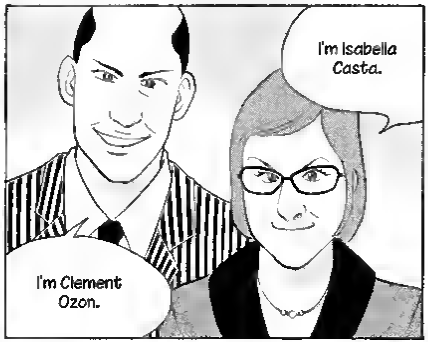
He's started going over to his place... to take care of his everyday needs...
Ever since Ajino had his operation, Rei-chan...
Hiss...

She's a huge help.
Though she keeps saying it's nothing.

Ahaha... he's making himself quite useful, too.
He even keeps Jean company...
And Ben-chan's also being his usual self?
Speaking of Ben-chan...
He said we can't leave Rei-chan and Ajino alone together...
Sounds lively.
And has started making himself at home at Ajino's place at some point.
Having Ben-chan with Ajino might actually do him some good.
Well, I do have extra rooms...
And Rei-chan also seems to be there right now...
Jean's renting an apartment in the neighborhood and visits often...
Is it about time for lunch?
Oh! You have a sharp nose, Gramps!

Help arrived three days later, thanks to Jean.
PHILADELPHIA

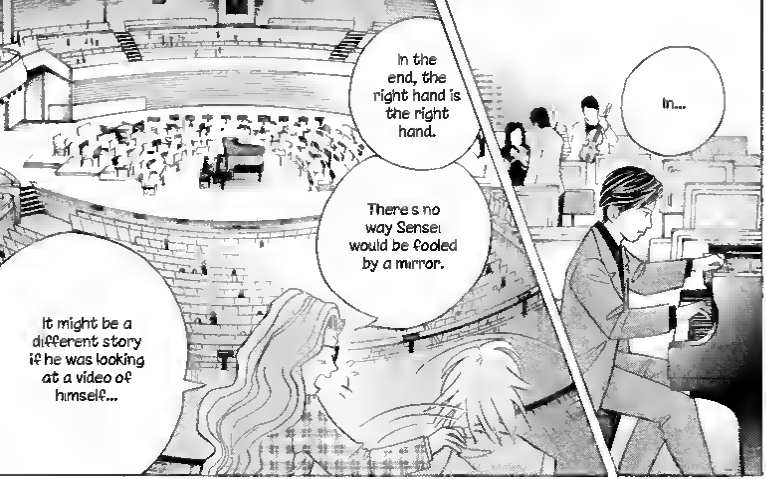
They're so tall.

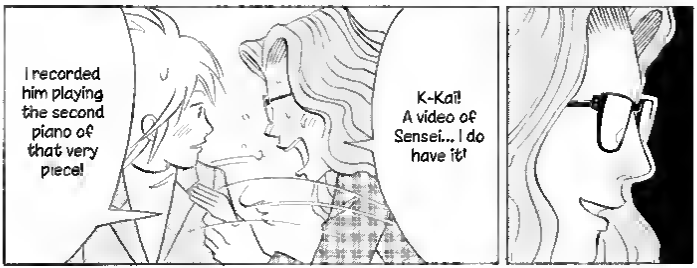

I'm Isabella Casta.
I'm Clement Ozon.

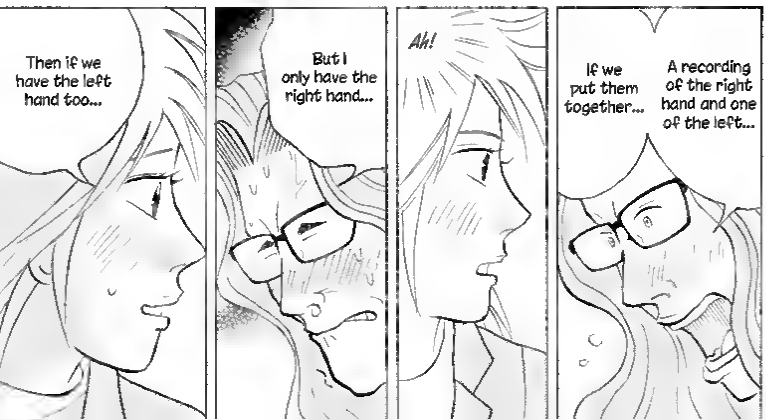
Eh?
Everything seems to be going nicely.

Well... Actually, something's wrong if he still has problem playing...
Because the adhesion in his tendon has already come undone, and he's able to move it like usual for the most part...
Nashimoto-sensei...
What does that mean?
He said he wanted to try a treatment that worked on a similar case in the past...
clang
Wh-
What did Dr. Nakao say?
In which case, it gets a little tricky...
So this might be a mental issue.
Using a mirror...
A mirror?!

So it gives the illusion of both hands playing smoothly...
Apparently, there were cases where it worked and cured people.
The right hand, which moves normally, looks like the left hand...
If you place a mirror between the hands...
S-Seriously?
Seems like it.
But it looks like the mirror didn't work on Ajino.
He might be able to cure him...
He said if Ajino could be released from the fear and doubt of not being able to move his fingers for just a moment...


In the end, the right hand is the right hand.
There's no way Sensei would be fooled by a mirror.
It might be a different story if he was looking at a video of himself...
In...


I recorded him playing the second piano of that very piece!
K-Kai! A video of Sensei... I do have it!

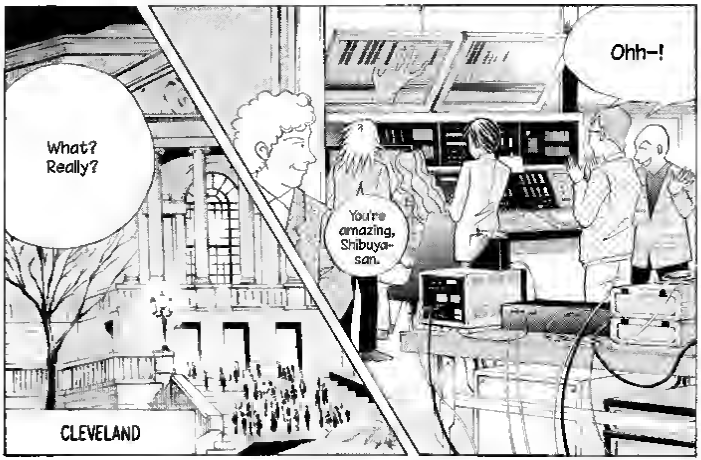

Then if we have the left hand too...
But I only have the right hand...
Ah!
If we put them together...
A recording of the right hand and one of the left...

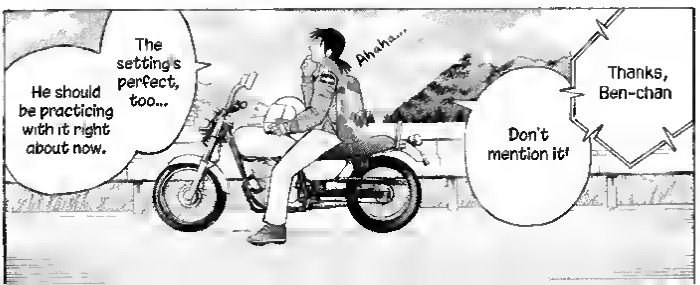
Where would you suggest we find a prodigy like that?!
Someone who can play in perfect sync with Ajino-sensei's recording...
...Wait, where do we get that?
I see! If we get the left hand...!
There!!
Right...

Ajima-sensei
Noir?
No one else can take this role...
I'm the only one who can do it.
P-
Pang-san.
All right.
Let's get started right away!

Sensei...
BAM
Thank
pa-
If that's decided, I need to practice, so get out.
You're in a hurry, right?
Sensei...
Is making a comeback.
He really is!!

If we do this here,
And do this...
How's that now?!!
WASHINGTON


What? Really?
You're amazing, Shibuya-san.
Ohh-!
CLEVELAND


He should be practicing with it right about now.
The setting's perfect, too...
Ahaha...
Don't mention it!
Thanks, Ben-chan

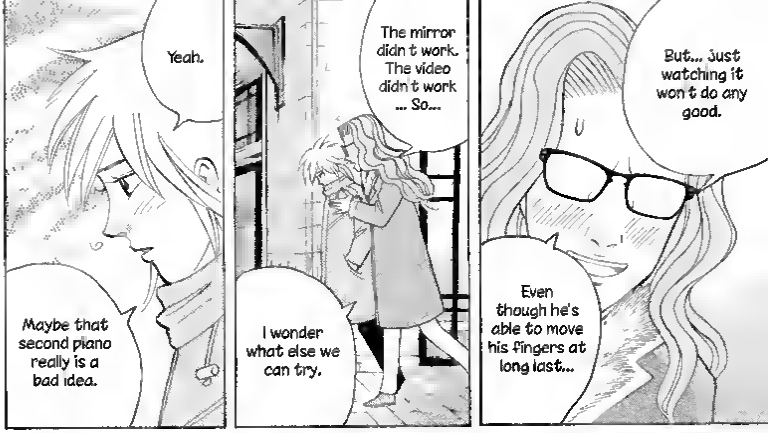
Is it Wei Pang's?
No matter how you look at it, it's not Kai's hand...
The left hand...

What am I so afraid of?
Why...
Can't I find my resolve, I wonder?
I...

FORT WORTH

I see.
So that video didn't work either...

But he likes that video and watches it a lot apparently.
Hehhhhh...
That's too bad! It was a work of art, too...
Yeah... it didn't seem to have any effect.


Yeah.
Maybe that second piano really is a bad idea.
The mirror didn't work. The video didn't work ... So...
I wonder what else we can try.
But... Just watching it won't do any good.
Even though he's able to move his fingers at long last...

I wonder...
I'm telling you, it has to be a habit.

Hi, Kai!
Mr. Shibuya!

For now, let's go all out and get the contract settled... to cheer Sensei up!
Hi
.....

Huh?

WHAAAAT?!!

That's right!
We got to the point where he just had to sign...
But he refused them. He even gave up on the tour and returned to Japan on top of that.

He...
He turned it down?

Th-That's just ridiculous...
Isabella... Even though you two were with him... Was the contract... really so overwhelming that he lost all confidence?
The other party wouldn't give up and said they didn't mind waiting another year...
But he said he didn't know how many years it would take for him to regain his confidence.
Wh-Why?
Of all things, he said he'd lost his confidence...
So it seems Aino-sensei isn't doing well, yes?
And it isn't certain when he'll get better, either...
We captured Shibuya-san and interrogated him.
Of course not... It was a good contract.
But he actually turned it down for another reasan.
Jean?
Monsieur?
Jean!

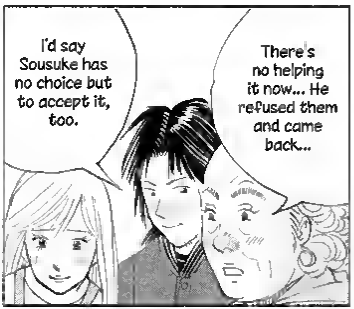
What's the meaning of this?!
Do you understand how big an opportunity that contract offered?!
To throw it away just like that...
And aren't you in the middle of a tour?!
Do you have any idea what you're doing?

Besides, more and more people have started to go their own ways, too...
I made sure to tell them before I left.
The tour is voluntary participation anyway.
I do.
There's nothing you need to do right now other than play the piano.
Because I believe I have to do what's needed the most right now...
It's fine even if I don't get the contract right away...
I-
I came back to play the piano with you, Ajino!!
That's why I came back!
Yep!

OF COURSE YOU MATTER!!
YOU JUST NEED TO WORRY ABOUT YOURSELF!!
I DON'T MATTER!!
YOU IDIOT!
YOUR PRACTICE IS 100 TIMES MORE IMPORTANT!!
BECAUSE FOR ME,
Such an idiot.

So let's practice.
Though I'll be the teacher...

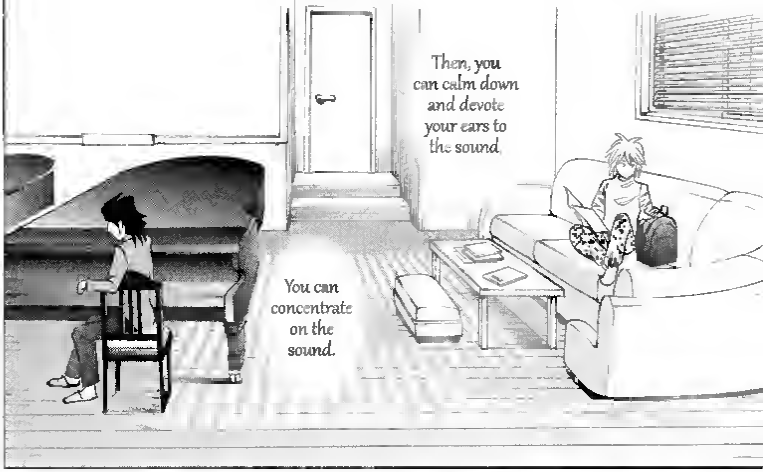
Hey, Ajino...
MOZART

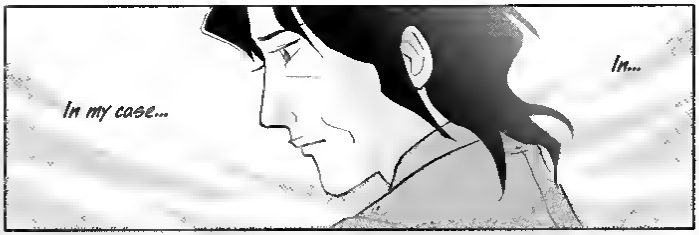

I'd say Sousuke has no choice but to accept it, too.
There's no helping it now... He refused them and came back...

Your left hand is a newborn, Ajino...
It's not like you're able to play well right from the start.
Let's see...

Say, Just as "the forest" is a special place for me...
There must be something that's special for you too...
First, close your eyes and imagine it...
...Something like that!
This is a method my teacher taught me...
When I first started learning the piano.
It's pretty useful!

Ichinose.
What is your favorite place?
It can be your favorite scenery, too.
It can be anywhere that'll calm you down.
Right now, you're in that scenery.
You have a piano in front of you.
...Yes, imagine that


You can concentrate on the sound.
Then, you can calm down and devote your ears to the sound.


In my case...
In...

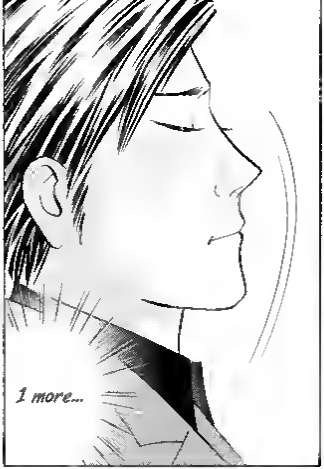
SPLASH...
SPLASH...

Which should we go with. .for the practice piece .?
Just think about the gap between that and reality...
And the image alone has grown in your head all these years...
Your ideal form of music is so perfect to begin with, no one can ever hope to attain it.
That's right...
I've brought too many contenders.
Once mattered to me so much, I would gladly give my life for it.
Regaining the ability to play that kind of dazzling music...

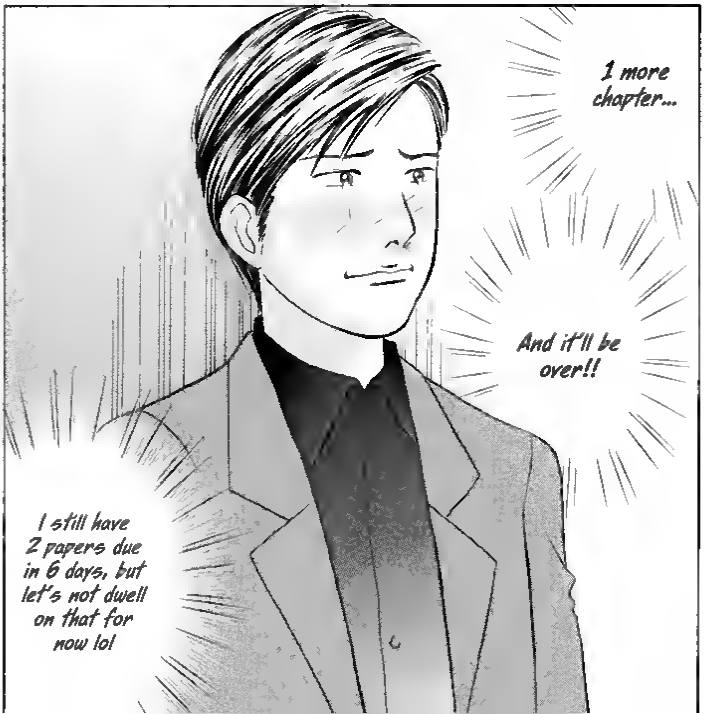
But...
Maybe it's okay not to rush it.
I wanted it so much...
I wanted it so much...
Ah! Should we start off with Twinkle Twinkle Little Star?!
Let's take it slow!
Mozart's variations are pretty nice...
But why don't we start with the original?

Only got life breathed back into it just now.
My left hand...
That said, I'm still pretty strict!
You okay with that?
Hehe...
So I can return to that place...

Rehabilitation END



*QC/N: THIS IS A JOKE PAGE IN CASE YOU DIDN'T NOTICE



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一色まこと

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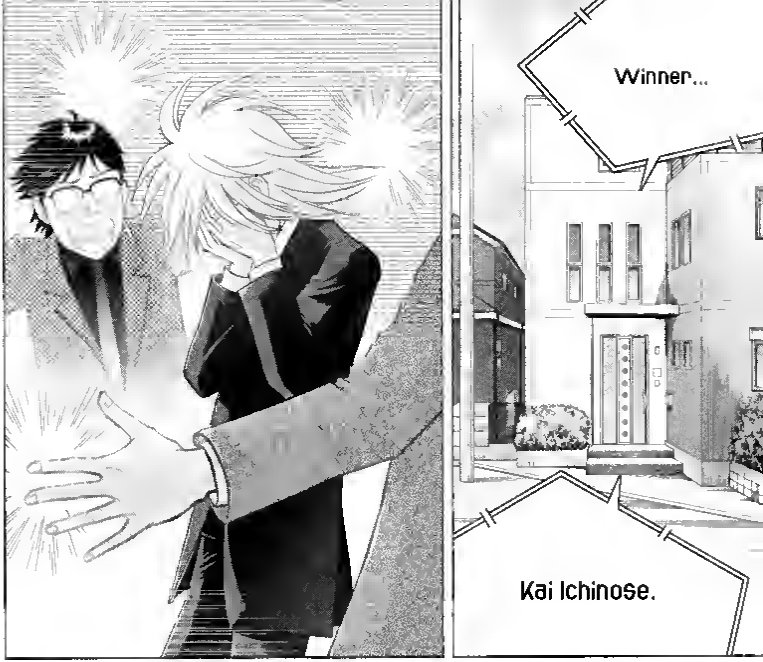
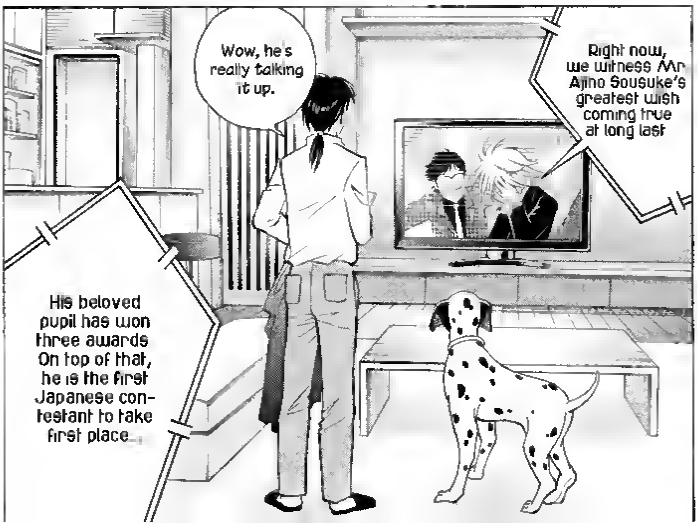
Final Chapter Comeback Recital


Winner...
Kai Ichinose.


Wow, he's really talking it up.
Right now, we witness Mr. Ajino Sousuke's greatest wish coming true at long last
His beloved pupil has won three awards On top of that, he is the first Japanese contestant to take first place...

Much to everyone's surprise...
Mr. Ajino, already a star 27 years ago, was eliminated during the first round of the Chopin Competition.
Beep
Which actually added to Mr. Ajino's worldwide fame...
Beep
Wow, Jean looked so young...
Even though he was already bald...
What's more, Jean-Jacques Serrault, gave up his position as a judge in protest...
Well... I guess there's no helping it, what with the timing and all...
They're airing documentaries about Ajino everywhere.
As a result of a tragic accident, he lost both his beloved fiancee and the use of his left hand...
Beep

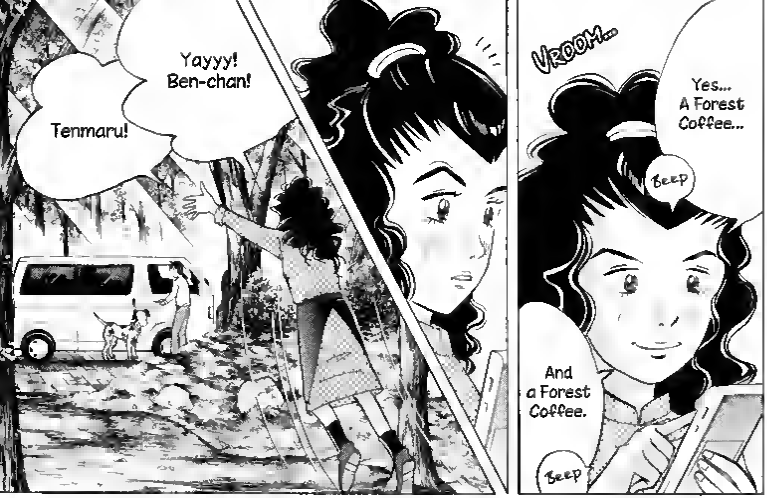
He's been holed up in the piano room lately.
All this fuss must be hard on Sensei, too...
I wonder if he's okay
Even I'm worried about him.
Whoops, can't hang around like this.
Knock
Knock

Let's get going soon.
Sensei, it's time.
Woof

Thanks.
Alright.

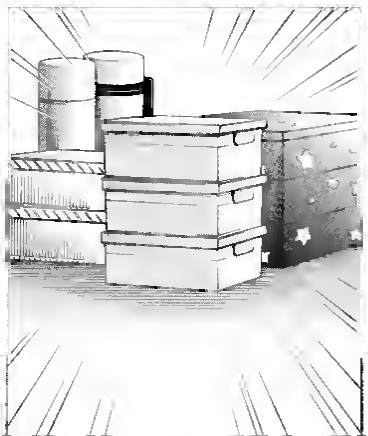
Anyway, just take a snooze in the car, Sensei! We'll be there when you wake up.
Really? You're scaring me.
You don't look too well...
Will you be okay, Sensei?

Eh...
Kai's...not here today?
Forest of the Piano Cafe
Then, two "Forest Coffees" for now.
Can you do that, Ari-chan?
I came because word has it that he's back in Japan...
That's too bad.
Forest of the Piano Cafe


Yayyy! Ben-chan!
Tenmaru!
VROOM...
Yes... A Forest Coffee...
Beep
And a Forest Coffee.
Beep

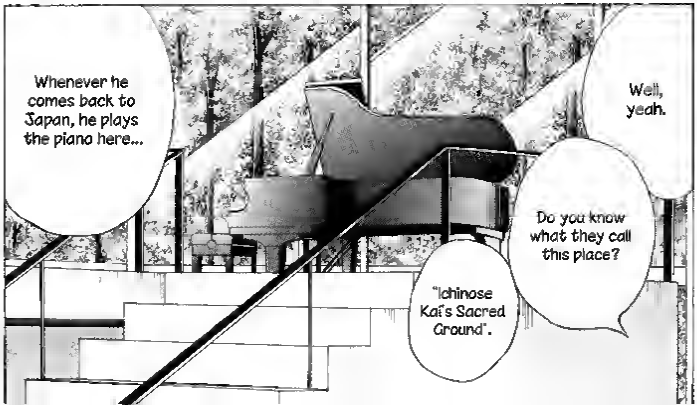
Woof
Hey, Arisa! Are you keeping up with your work?!
Is Rei-chan here?

Hey, hey, hey, I can't eat this much.
I said give me something light.



Sorry!
You don't have to eat it all.
What happened to your economic sense...?
And you have a bunch of useless people working here...

Reiko! Don't make this cafe close down!
Don't forget that Kai's giving you money for the loan.
I know.
But a lot of customers come here...


Well, yeah.
Whenever he comes back to Japan, he plays the piano here...
Do you know what they call this place?
"Ichinose Kai's Sacred Ground".

It's amazing that you got the right to use the land closest to the forest in the first place.
We owe a lot to Sensei...
That's right! You and that old man at Arisa's place have Sensei as your guarantor!

He's sleeping right now, and he's really nervous.
I'm pretty much the only one he can see until everything's over.

Ah... is it okay if I talk to Sensei?
He's in the car, right?
Of course you can't!

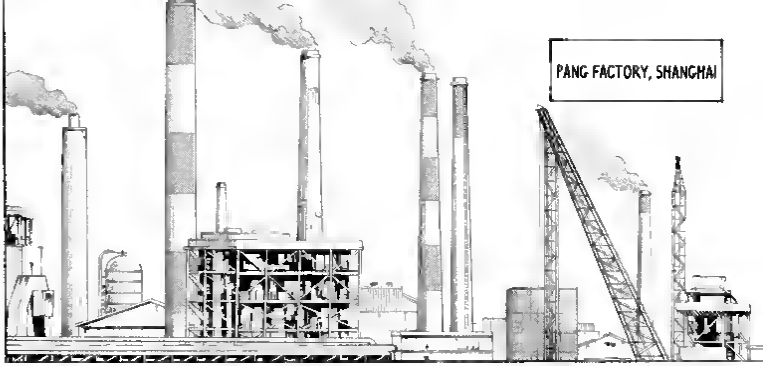
Eh?
Is this...?

Then give him this.

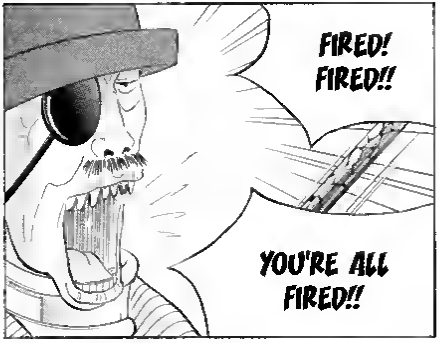
What's with that face?
Alright.

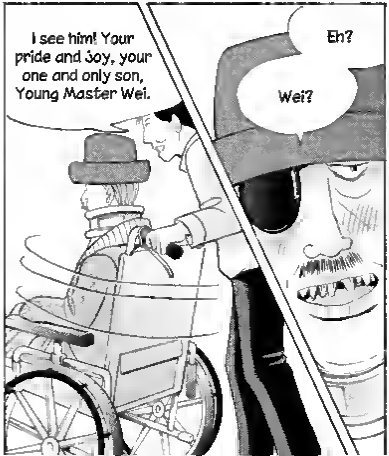
Will this thing work?
Man, are you a kid?
The piece of the piano in the forest that he returned to you...?
Yup. It's a talisman...
What I think it is?
THUMP
WHOA!
WELL, IF IT ISN'T BEN-CHAN!
Chomp
G-
Whoosh
Good job, Ten-chan.
OH NO

Huhh?! But it'll be my first time in Tokyo!
Eh-? What's going on?
You better not be wearing that tomorrow!
First of all, how many times do I have to tell you to quit putting that flower in your hair?!
Quit messing around, you!
So that's why you're closed tomorrow.
Oh, are you ladies going to Tokyo?
That's right. That's sexual harassment, handyman!
How?!
What's a code?
What's wrong with a flower?
There's a dress code!
That's exactly why you shouldn't wear it!
Rei-chan, are you sure you're not in the red because of them?
That's right! We're all going to Tokyo!!


PANG FACTORY, SHANGHAI

Chairman, please, anything but that...
SHUT IT!
DROP DEAD!!


FIRED! FIRED!!
YOU'RE ALL FIRED!!

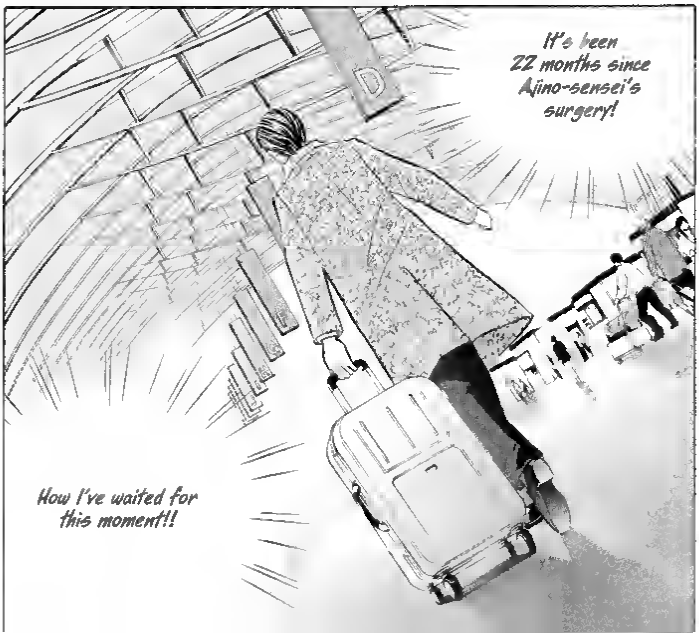

I see him! Your pride and joy, your one and only son, Young Master Wei.
Eh?
Wei?

Chairman Hao.
President Wei won't allow it.

W-
Chairman Hao.
Wei! Call me Dad!
Dad,
It would be a problem if even a single worker were fired.
I decide who is fired or not!
Hao...
If you can't promise me that, I won't come back ever again.

Hao finally came back from the brink of death, but he's lost a good part of his memory... I wonder what the problem is.
He believed me to be his only relative and started doting on me.
Oh man. I'm tired of making deals like this.
I promise! Of course I do!
I'll listen to anything you say.
It's extremely disturbing...
But since he leaves everyone else in peace, I just go along with it...
Ahh...
To Japan.
To where Ajino-sensei is...
But who knows when Hao will regain his senses... I can't let my guard down.
Wei, where are you going this time?

Wei! I'll accompany you!
Sorry, but no thanks!
I want to go alone.
Yes.
I'm going to Ajino-sensei's comeback recital!


It's been 22 months since Ajino-sensei's surgery!
How I've waited for this moment!!

SUNTORY HALL
Please sell me a ticket

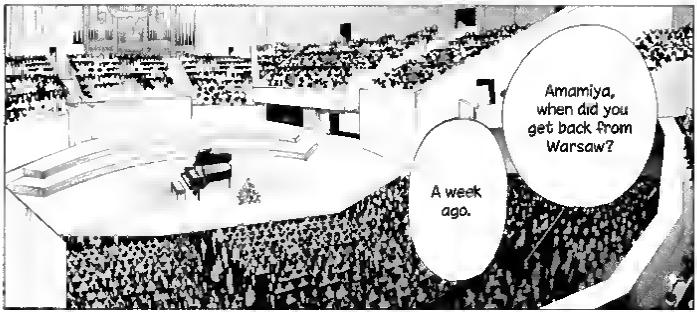
In about 30 minutes, the recital we've been waiting so long for will finally begin
F-Finally, this day has come...

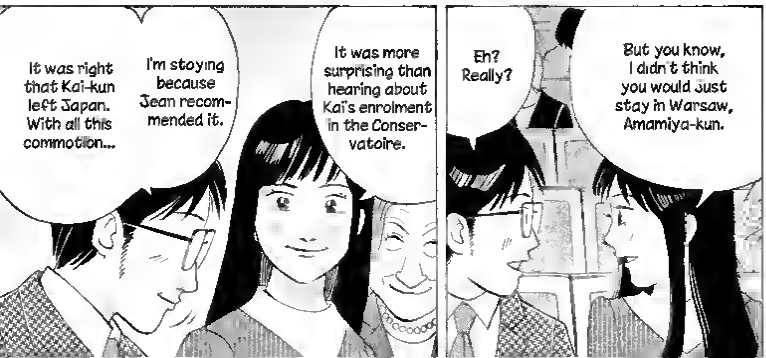
Today's Performance
AJINO SOUSUKE
COMEBACK
PIANO RECITAL
Sousuke Ajino
Piano Recital
Accompaniment: The MHK Orchestra

Ajino-sensei's "Comeback Recital" has been featured in the media for days...
He really is insanely popular.

It has become a huge event, contrary to what the man himself wanted.
His every move is under the media's attention...
Today, we will be closely following Ichinose-kun for a day in Paris!
But even if it hadn't, since Kai won the Chopin Competition...
He has completely become the Man of the Hour.
What??
Parts 1-5 of the DVD of the young Ajino Sousuke has sold out!
There are only a few CDs left!
And so the revival story of his teacher, Ajino-sensei, moved the entire world...

Ahaha... The invitation was from Kai...
Thank you for inviting me along to this event...
Takaka-san and Shiraishi-san! You're early!
Amamiya-kun, over here!

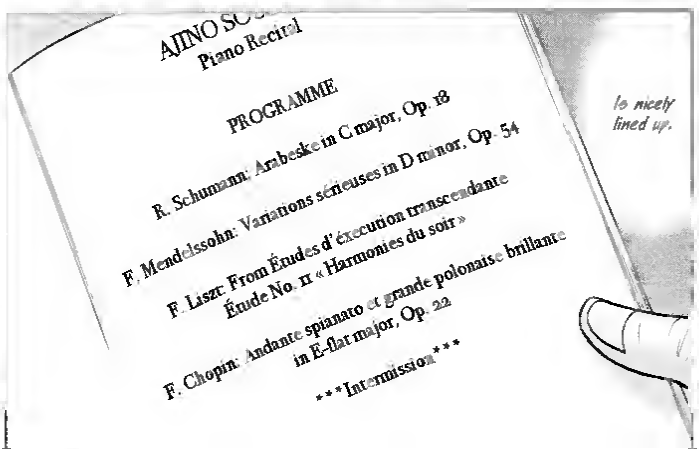

Amamiya, when did you get back from Warsaw?
A week ago.


It was right that Kai-kun left Japan. With all this commotion...
I'm staying because Jean recommended it.
It was more surprising than hearing about Kai's enrolment in the Conservatoire.
Eh? Really?
But you know, I didn't think you would just stay in Warsaw, Amamiya-kun.

It's really is a hot topic.
Well... yeah.

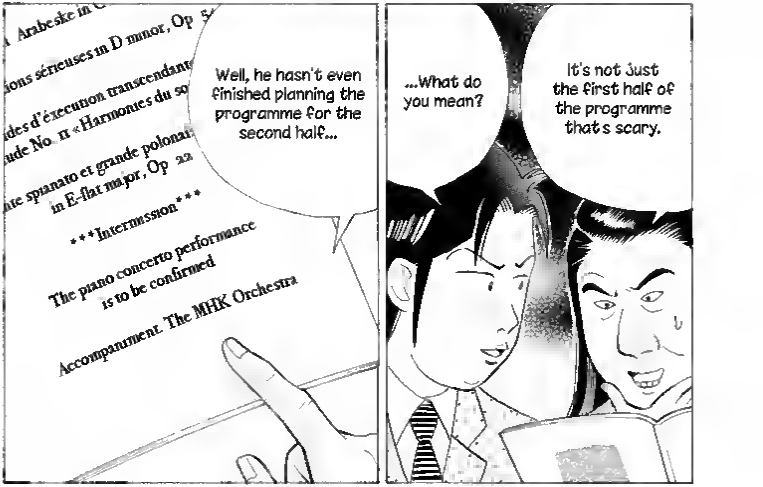
Did you see the program?
I did. I heard the music circle was in uproar when this program was announced.

What was once Sensei's specialty repertoire...
For the first half of the recital...


AJINO SO
Piano Recital
PROGRAMME
R. Schumann: Arabeske in C major, Op. 18
F. Mendelssohn: Variations sérieuses in D minor, Op. 54
F. Liszt: From Études d'exécution transcendante
Étude No. 11 « Harmonies du soir »
F. Chopin: Andante spianato et grande polonaise brillante
in E-flat major, Op. 22
Intermission
le nicely
lined up.

There's no doubt that old fans of Ajino will be happy though...
To think I can hear that piano playing again. It's like a dream.
It is! What a time to be alive!!
N-
No matter how you look at this, this programme is just reckless..
Wouldn't it make people happier, just leaving that glorious music in their memories, rather than having a comeback?
But... if his piano playing was such a rarity...
I've waited so long for this day, but...
I'm scared!
I-
With these pieces, people will compare it to his performances back in his golden days, whether he likes it or not.
In the end, will Ajino Sousuke really be able to play like he did before?!

That guy... came back for this, too?
Kousei-kun! Kousei-kun!


Arabeske in
ions sérieuses in D minor, Op
ides d'exécution transcendant
ude No. 11 «Harmonies du so
ite spianato et grande polonai
in E-flat major, Op. 22
Intermission
The piano concerto performance is to be confirmed
Accompaniment: The MHK Orchestra
Well, he hasn't even finished planning the programme for the second half...
...What do you mean?
It's not just the first half of the programme that's scary.

Th-That's bad news.
But there are rumors that he couldn't decide until right before the recital and he hadn't even been able to practice much.
It's fine if they just didn't make it in time for printing these.

Of course Ichinose would do that! That much is a given.
I heard he went as far as turning down a big contract to keep Ajino Sousuke company during his intensive rehab training.
Because he admires Ajino as his teacher...
Speaking of Ichinose...
I see...
It's only natural, but there are a considerable number of Kai's fans at this venue, too.
Eh, you know her?
Ah!
It's Sae-chan.
Ohh, I see!
She showed me around when I visited Paris during summer vacation.

By the way, where's Kai? Isn't he going to watch from the auditorium?
Nope. He's going to be working hard behind the scenes today... That's what he said.

Ah... I guess she can't see me...
Too bad.

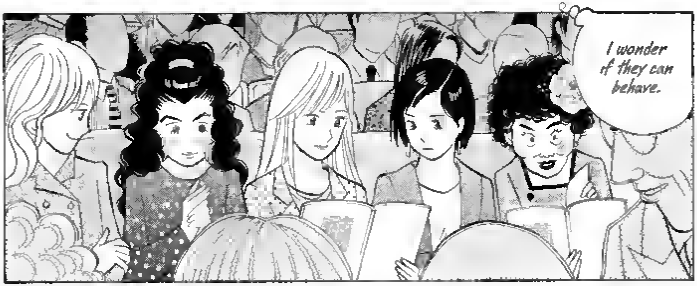
Wow, Takakasan.
That area there... There's a group of teachers from Warsaw.
Really?

I think he's watching from somewhere, though...

Wow, you're right. It's all foreigners in that area...
I did hear that they got tickets early, but I wonder just how many they got.

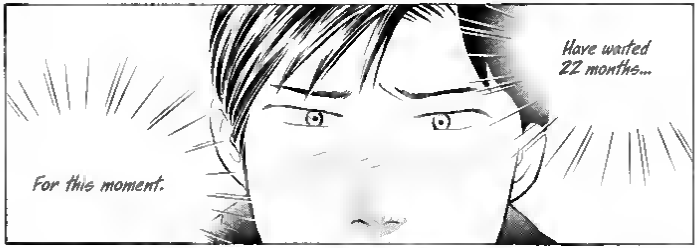
Adamski, too...
And even though Wei Pang is a given...
Ah.
This many people gathered from all over the world just ta listen ta this recital...
T-To think that...
Oh no! I'm so nervous all of a sudden.
FOX
In all this pressure.
Sensei will be having his comeback recital...
I-I'm scared.

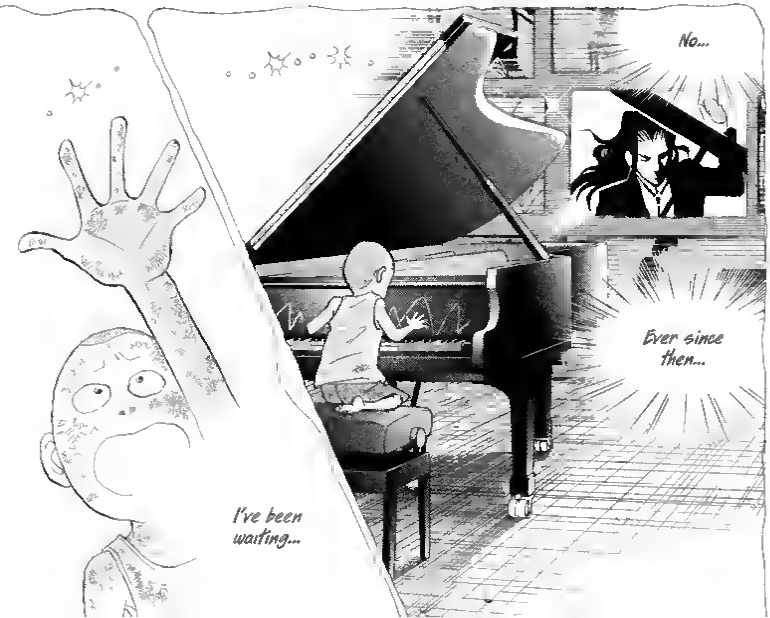
Good, good!
Oh!
So the country bumpkins made it.
It's almost time.
Please, let this recital be a success!!
O-Oh, dear God of the Piano!


I wonder if they can behave.

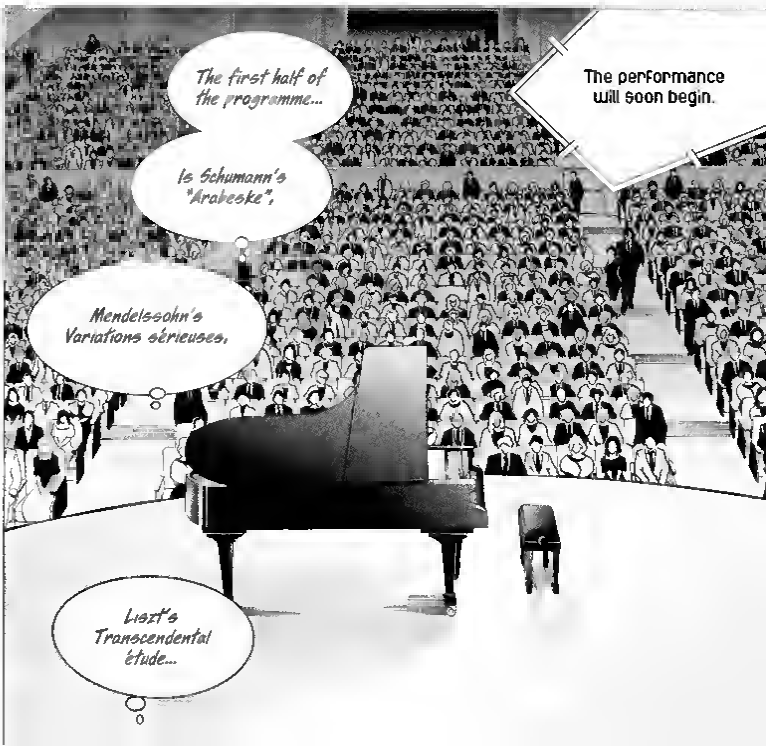
Thank you for coming to Ajino Sousuke's piano recital today
Is this English?
They said it in Japanese first, but it was too soft to hear, huh?
Ladies and gentlemen, we apologize for the wait
SHOCK

Photographing and recording during the performance are
I...


Have waited 22 months...
For this moment.


No...
Ever since then...
I've been waiting...

For the music that had tied my life together...
I've been waiting for it this whole time!!


The first half of the programme...
Is Schumann's "Arabeske",
Mendelssohn's Variations sérieuses,
Liszt's Transcendental étude...
The performance will soon begin.

Will this make him or break him...
But I'm scared after all...
I-I've waited so long for this moment.
And Chopin's Andante spianato et grande polonaise brillante...
These four pieces.
I guess I'm off.
Now...

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チ
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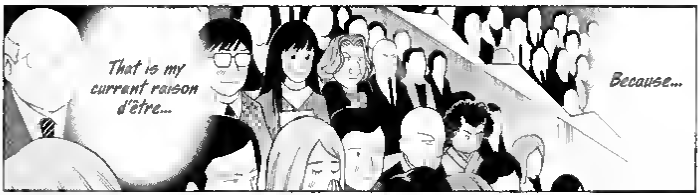
チ

No matter the outcome...
I've been waiting...
I have no fear.
For this moment.

I'm also aware of how risky this programme is.

But as of today, with these pieces...
I will return to the world!
STEINWAY & SONS


That is my current raison d'être...
Because...

After encountering Kai's music...

And being granted a second life.

Ah...
This sound...

No...
Ajino Sousuke. His music...
The music... which tied my life together!
That's not all. It's more...
More than that... It's filled with a kindness which penetrates your heart.
My word! To think he would recover this much..!
M-Magnificent...
It's Ajino-kun's dazzling music.
My...

I want to...
Dedicate this piece...
To my late mother... and my sweetheart in heaven...

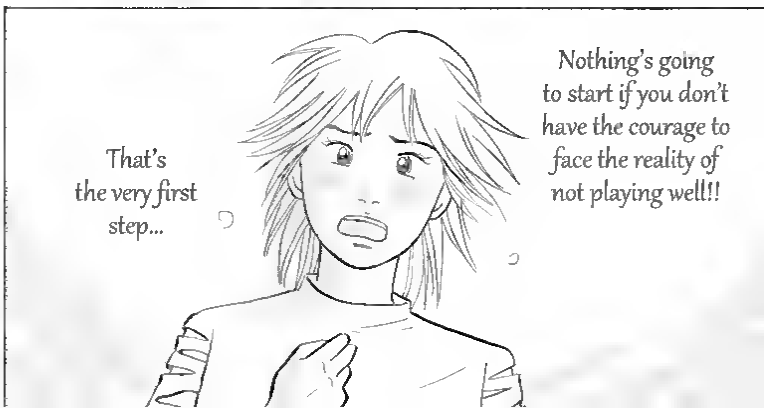
Who resurrected me!
And to Kai...

Kai...

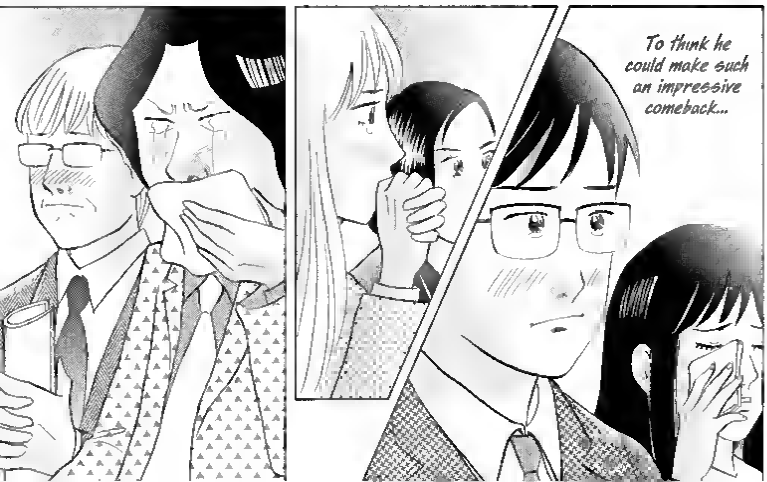
You really worked hard, Kai!
Asmo's the one that worked hard.
I... Respect Sensei from the bottom of my heart.
Stage Left
No naked fla
Are you sure you don't want to listen in the auditorium?
I'm fine here.
What is this? You knew best how good Sousuke is.
He did it. Sousuke's fine now.
Yeah, Yeah.
You knew the recital would be a success...

"It doesn't matter if you don't play well!"
STEINWAY & SON

"Of course you won't!!"


That's the very first step...
Nothing's going to start if you don't have the courage to face the reality of not playing well!!

Grandpa Jean's over 70!
You still have another 20 years, Aöino!!
It's fine as long as you can go back to your job when you turn 70!


To think he could make such an impressive comeback...

No matter what, I want to study under Ajino-sensei.
No matter what.
I no longer have to fear a phantom.
With this...
Because with this, my ultimate rival has returned.

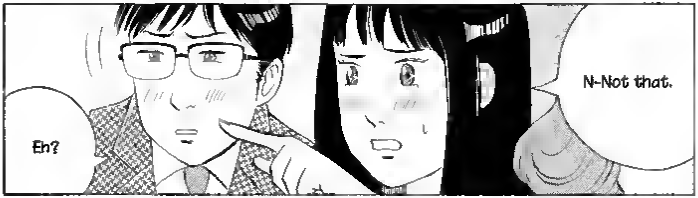
My, my, that was moving.
Isn't it wonderful?
He's become a treasure to Japan's music circle.
I'd expect no less from the one who trained Ichinose Kai.

K-Kousei-kun, what is that?
What do you mean? Isn't that the orchestra getting ready?

Maybe I'll re-enroll in university in Japan and study under Ajino.
Sup
I have to tell Carnegie Hall about this.

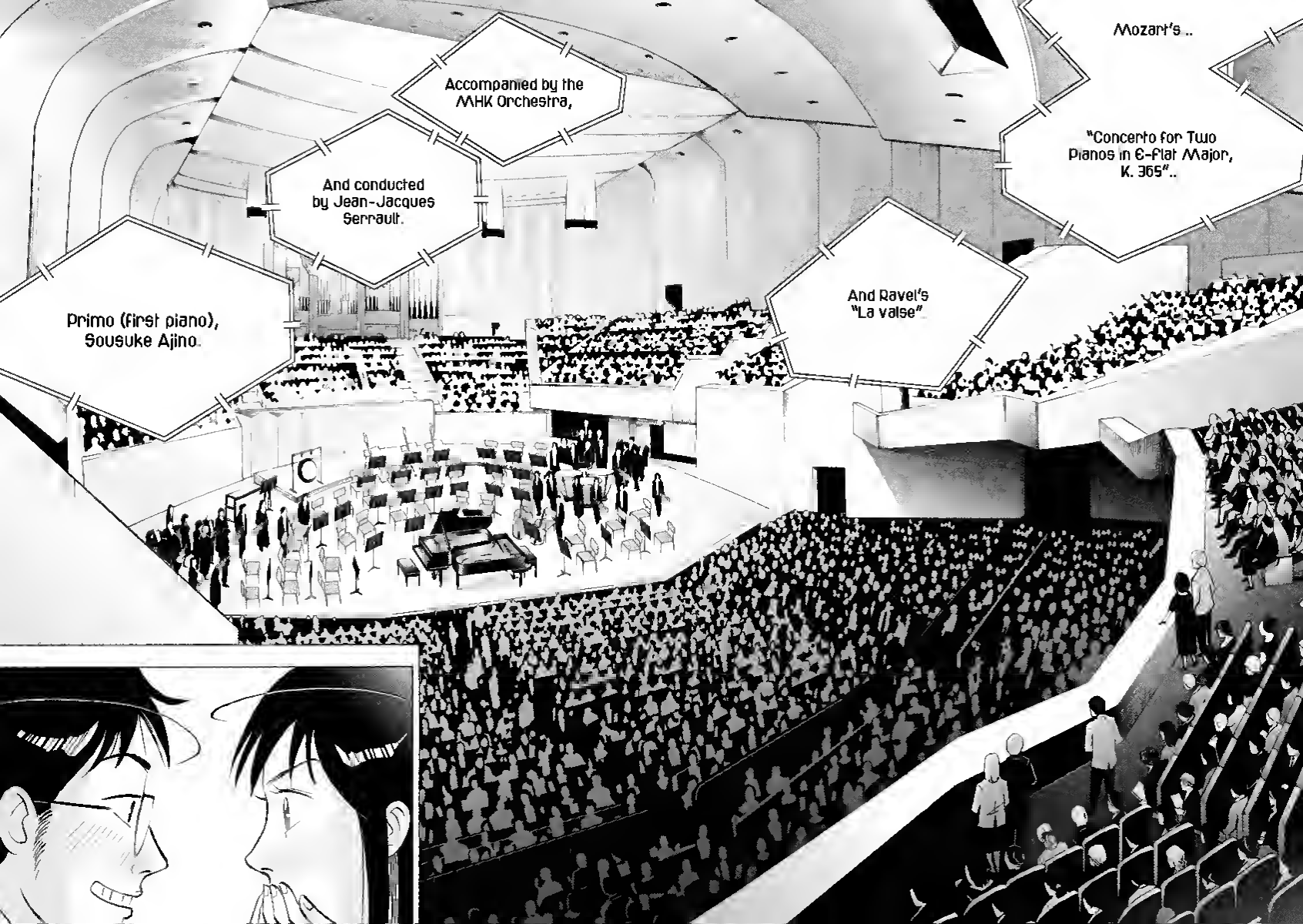
Ahh!
M-M-Mukai-san!
Mukai-san is tuning!!

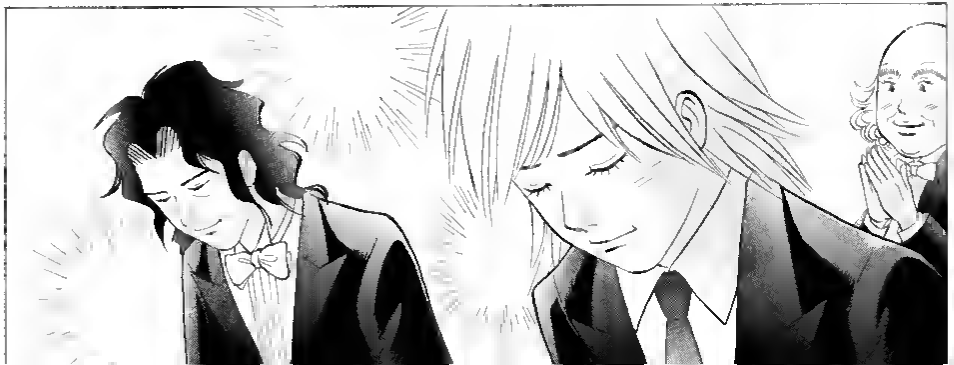
A-Amamiya-kun, what's that?
Eh?


N-Not that.
Eh?

Why are there two pianos?

There are...
Two pianos?
Hey, what's going on?
Well, that's...
The second half of the recital will soon begin...
So please return to your seats and turn off your mobile phones.
We will now announce the second half of the programme
Two of them.
The pieces for today's piano concerto performance are...


Mozart's ..
"Concerto for Two Pianos in E-flat Major, K. 365"..
Accompanied by the MHK Orchestra,
And conducted by Jean-Jacques Serrault.
Primo (first piano), Sousuke Ajino.
And Ravel's "La valse"



Secondo (second piano),
Kai Ichinose.
Woohoooooooo

SILENCE...

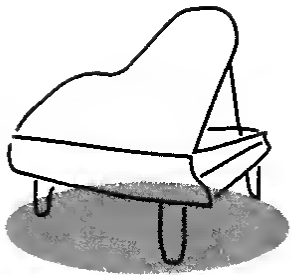
This is a day...
Ajino...

I've dreamt of for so long.
I never thought it would ever come true.

I dedicate,
This performance,

Piano no Mori fin.

Special thanks to Koji Shimoda, Yasushi Nakao, Shuko Igarashi, Kohei Furukawa, Eijiro Shimada, Jun Kurachi, Shinichiro Yoshihara, Kenichiro Shinohara and KOZO KAKEI



The Perfect World of KAI

MUSIC SUPERVISION / SHIMOOA KOJI

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A FEW WORDS FROM THE SCANLATORS

Thanks for letting me be part of this. I hope you've enjoyed reading it as much as I've loved working on it.

- Mzthpix, Proofreader [incumbent]

I was only around for a few chapters in the middle of this series, but had a great time with everyone. I'm happy to see it's finished!

- Mikaiah, Cleaner

I'm glad that I had a chance to work on this beautiful and touching project. I can't believe this long ride is over. I didn't work on Piano no Mori from the beginning, but it was the first project I finished. I want to thank all the people with whom we have worked together. That was plenty fun! <3

- Stelhon, Cleaner & Redrawer [incumbent]

Wow! It's the first time I am asked to comment at the end of a series that I have worked on. Well, I didn't work on Piano no Mori much, but as a redrawer, I get the impression of ~~...~~ crowds, crowds, fingers, lines... uhhh... not my favorite thing to do. But well, it was still fun to work on it and to rant about how I don't like fixing the crowds ^^)

- Tx93, Redrawer

Another series comes to an end!... It's bittersweet.. We are going to miss Piano but are also happy it ended \o/

- Alexfilla, typesetter [Incumbent]

Piano no Mori was the whole reason I decided to join EGS, and it also had me this close to turning into a male-fujoshi =|

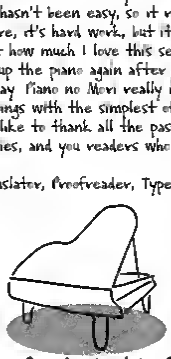
- Krow, Typesetter

I'm grateful to have been able to work on one of my favourite series and with such excellent people. Thank you everyone for your hard work.

- Kuroto, Typesetter

Time sure does fly. EGS started working on Piano no Mori from Chapter 77 back in late 2011. I myself joined EGS in May 2012, and before I knew it, Piano no Mori has taken up 4 years of my life. I have raged at incompetent trial staff members for making me clean up after their crappy work (Seriously, how could you get Chopin's name wrong when the whole series is literally about the Chopin Competition??? DO YOUR RESEARCH GODDAMMIT) I have sacrificed sleep to meet the deadlines (oh look it's 7am right now lol) I have slammed my head on my desk when I spotted mistakes after the chapters were released. It hasn't been easy, so it really is a bittersweet moment now that it has finally come to an end. Sure, it's hard work, but it's hard work that I enjoyed doing because words simply can't convey just how much I love this series. It has fostered my love for classical music. It got me into picking up the piano again after all these years just because the characters look so HAPPY when they play. Piano no Mori really is a unique treasure of a manga. It is able to pluck at the reader's heartstrings with the simplest of things, and I hope these things aren't lost in our translation. I would like to thank all the past and present staff members at EGS who have worked on this beautiful series, and you readers who have stuck with us all these years. It has been a fantastic ride.

- Kusunoki, Translator, Proofreader, Typesetter & Quality Checker [Incumbent]



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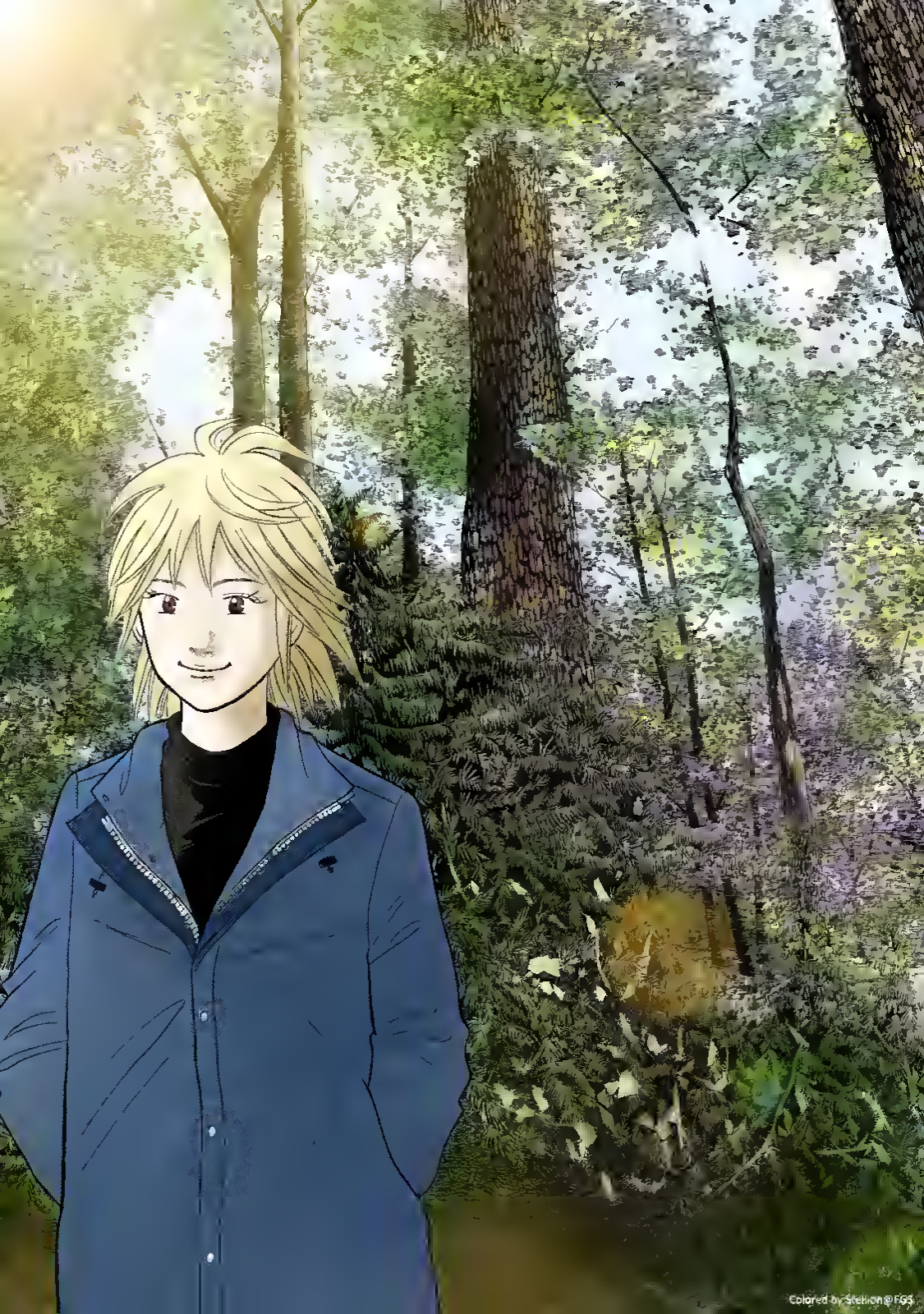
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